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THE WOUNDED NAME

Also by D. K. Broster

SIR ISUMBRAS AT THE FORD

THE YELLOW POPPY

'MR. ROWL'

THE FLIGHT OF THE HERON

THE GLEAM IN THE NORTH

THE DARK MILE

SHIPS IN THE BAY!

A FIRE OF DRIFTWOOD

CHILD ROYAL

ALMOND, WILD ALMOND

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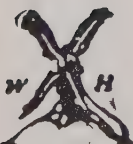
With G. Forester

WORLD UNDER SNOW

THE WOUNDED NAME

BY

D. K. BROSTER



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"O good Horatio, what a wounded name,
Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me!"

Hamlet, Act. v. Sc. 2.

"How shall I find that friend
Of the rare friends, the deep-hearted?
When the delicate revels end
And the maskers have all departed.
At a sudden hour and a drear,
For the sweet hour is the sternest,
Thou shalt know who held thee dear,
Whose hand was thine in earnest."

HERBERT TRENCH.

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AD AMICITIAM

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THE WOUNDED NAME

CHAPTER I

RUNNING WATER

"Without a horse, and a dog, *and* a friend, man would perish. The Gods gave me all three, and there is no gift like friendship. Remember this . . . when you become a young man. For your fate will turn on the first true friend you make."—RUDYARD KIPLING, *Puck of Pook's Hill* ("On the Great Wall").

(I)

THE lady who was writing at the rosewood escritoire near the window paused, and with the feather end of the quill traced along the days of the month on a little calendar headed '1814' which was propped up behind the inkstand.

"April the twelfth," she murmured, and wrote it at the top of the already finished letter under her hand.

She was not young—forty-five at least—but she was distinctly charming in her very short-waisted, close-fitting gown of lilac sarcenet. The irregular-shaped room, cool and fresh and sunlit, opened by a small bow-window on her left hand on to a garden that could not have been other than English. And she herself looked English, yet she had just signed a French name at the bottom of her letter, while over the mantelpiece hung the portrait of a middle-aged man with a refined and thoughtful face who did not even look English.

The door opened, and a man's voice could be heard speaking to someone outside.

"Laurent, is that you?" asked the lady, without looking up. She was sealing her letter. "Dearest, are you going out? Will you take this note to Mesdames Tantes, if you are passing?—Where *are* you going, by the way?"

"Fishing," responded the owner of the voice, coming in.

"Yes, of course I will take it for you, Maman. But isn't it the anniversary of something or other, so that the Aunts will be plunged in appropriate gloom, and will not approve of my occupation?"

The lady held up her face to his kiss. "No, I do not think it is the anniversary of any calamity to-day, otherwise they would not have agreed to come to supper." Once again she ran her quill along the almanac. "There is nothing now, I think, till Louis XVII's death in June. . . . You will be careful about the river, will you not, chéri? It must be in flood still, after the terribly severe winter we have had."

"Probably the gigantic salmon that I shall hook will pull me in," prophesied the young man teasingly. "Or perhaps I shall be taken with vertigo and fall in . . . or a tidal wave may come up from the sea!" The smile in his clear grey eyes spread to his mouth. "I am so glad that I shall never be a mother!"

"You are a very wicked son!" retorted the lady, laughing too, and she pulled down his head and kissed the crisp fair hair that, after the fashion of the day, clustered rather thickly on his forehead. "In France, you know, you will have to show me much more respect, from all I hear of the authority of a mother there."

"Respect!" exclaimed Laurent de Courtomer, as he looked at the girlish figure. "How can I respect the authority of a mother who only appears to be about five years older than I am myself? Am I then to respect you more in Paris, and to love you less?"

"Must they run in inverse proportion? Go and fish, Laurent, instead of talking nonsense, and forget that we shall so soon be living in France."

"I rather wish that I could," unpatriotically remarked the young Frenchman, taking up the note from the *escritoire*. "Is it wrong to be so fond of this country because one was born and brought up in it?" He looked up at the portrait of his father over the mantelpiece. "If only this had come four years ago!" And Mme de Courtomer followed his gaze and sighed.

Although Fate's keys had opened the gate so long shut, and her voice, through the bugles of the advancing Allies, was calling the stout Bourbon, Louis XVIII, from his retreat at Hartwell to the throne of his ancestors, *that* exile would never return to his native land. And since his widow was English, and his son had never set foot in France, though

both duty and sentiment might call them over the Channel to the young man's patrimony, neither of them could welcome the summons in quite the same spirit as he would have done. For to them it was not 'returning.'

"The Allies are nearly at Paris and Napoleon's star has set," said Laurent, turning away, "but, wonderful as it is, I do not somehow feel any more exhilarated than you do, Maman, for, after all, it is the bayonets of the foreigner which are bringing back the King. And I don't know my French relatives, and I shall miss my English ones."

Mme de Courtomer, rising, slipped her arm through his.

"Take care, darling, that the Aunts do not hear you talking like this! To them, as you know, it matters little who brings back the King, provided he is brought back—and to regret Devonshire would be the last offence."

"Nevertheless, I shall regret it," persisted Laurent, who did not easily change his affections. "You will too, I know. Still, we are coming back here every year, are we not? . . . Yes, I must start. And this is an invitation for Mesdames Tantes to sup with us to-night? Do you want an answer?"

"No," said his mother, studying him with a smile. "It is only to confirm an arrangement already made. But I should like a salmon."

"You shall have one," replied her son confidently. "And now permit me to practise taking a Parisian farewell of my respected mother, the Comtesse Henri de Courtomer, *née* Seymour." And he kissed her hand with a flourish.

(2)

Soon afterwards he mounted into his English gig, with his English groom behind in charge of his rod and tackle, and drove down the village street in one of the most English of counties. But he was thinking, "A few weeks more, and I shall no longer be Mr. Laurent Courtomer of Keynton House, but M. le Comte de Courtomer in the family mansion that I have never seen in the Faubourg St. Germain . . . where Mesdames Tantes, at least, will be in their element."

For Laurent's three great-aunts, 'Mesdames Tantes du Roi,' so christened by him on the analogy of those daughters of Louis XV who were thus known in the days of Louis XVI, were of a Royalist and Catholic fervour truly overwhelming. And of course, once in France, they would all, in French fashion, live together—as indeed they almost did now, settled

in one small Devonshire village. But at least they were not all under one roof, and Laurent was not quite sure that he was longing for that increased proximity.

He soon pulled up before a door in a red brick wall, and in a few seconds was walking up a tiled path to the habitation of Mesdemoiselles de Courtomer. He knew that he must deliver his note in person, for the Aunts would consider it unpardonable if he merely left it without paying his respects.

The countenance of Augustine, their elderly, precise maid, bore signs of excitement.

"Yes, Monsieur le Comte," she said in response to his query at the door. "Mesdames are within. And they are receiving company."

"Really?" said Laurent. "In the morning?"

"A traveller, Monsieur le Comte. An old acquaintance just come over from France—M. le Baron de Vicq."

Laurent, by now in the hall, with an engraving of Louis XVI mounting the scaffold on one side of him, and a bust of the Duc d'Enghien wreathed in immortelles on the other, murmured, "This is indeed great news!" For he seemed to remember having heard that in times inconceivably remote M. de Vicq had been a suitor for the hand of Tante Bonne . . . or was it that he had been a flame of Tante Odile's? And before he bowed respectfully over the hands of his venerable relatives, he beheld a withered but well-preserved old gentleman (yet younger, surely, by a decade than any of them) rise from a chair at a disappointingly equal distance from all of the old ladies . . . from Tante Odile's majestic piety and grey curls, from Tante Clotilde's even greater majesty and even more denuded (and therefore even more imposingly becaped) head, and from the long-faded prettiness of Tante Bonne, the youngest, who wore the smallest cap of any, and the least hideous cameo, and no jet at all, so that Tante Clotilde had more than once been known to accuse this eighty-year-old junior of hers of an ineradicable tendency to levity.

But Tante Clotilde herself had undergone a change since Lady Day, when a fair wind from France had blown so many clouds out of the Royalist sky. Her majesty was not less, her loyalism even more pronounced, but a ribbon of a discreet maroon shade had replaced the black moiré round her cap, and her manner to all and sundry was marked by an unexampled benignancy. So that Laurent, when he had saluted her dry, shrivelled hand with the mourning ring, was almost

startled by the sensible favour with which she kissed him on either cheek, for though the greeting was not a novelty, it was often frosty. Tante Clotilde considered that Laurent spoke English too well, and his mother's habit of occasionally calling him Laurence—"a girl's name"—was an abomination to her. But, willy-nilly, her great-nephew would have to be entirely French now.

M. de Vicq, on introduction, made him a bow of another generation, and the young man, having duly delivered his note, was inspired to announce his hope that if the newcomer were staying the night he would give the ladies his escort up to Keynton House; this addition to the party would, he assured him, procure his mother and himself the greatest pleasure. After the proper amount of pressing the old gentleman accepted, and Laurent thereupon began to make efforts to extricate himself from his great-aunts' drawing-room.

But this was not so easy. M. de Vicq, whose fervour appeared to be almost equal to that of the old ladies, had embarked on a rapturous description of the enthusiasm manifested at the entry of the Duc d'Angoulême, the King's nephew, into Bordeaux about three weeks before, the news of which had caused such joyful anticipations in the little court at Hartwell, and since, after all, Laurent was French and on the point of treading French soil, the narration was not devoid of interest. Only it had not the charm of entire novelty, and he would rather have heard it at another time. It must, therefore, have been a rather unfortunate spirit of contradiction which led him to remark that Brittany and Vendée, for all their long and glorious struggle on behalf of monarchy, had not at this particular juncture played much part in the imminent restoration of the royal house.

"Oh, que si, Monsieur!" exclaimed the Baron, shocked; and Tante Clotilde said, "Fie, nephew!" in her deepest voice, and he was assured that under the rule of 'the Corsican' more than thirty secondary chiefs had perished in that region for the Cause, and their names began to shower upon him.

"I take back my remark!" cried the young man, laughing. "Besides, after all, mes tantes, you are not mentioning a leader who is alive, which is better. What about that fellow in Brittany—L'Oiseleur, the Fowler, who is always luring the enemy into difficult positions, and who is personally so lucky that he is supposed to possess a charm of some sort? . . . Or is that all a myth, and his defence of the burning mill also?"

M. de Vicq almost started from his chair. "What an extraordinary thing that you should speak of L'Oiseleur to-day, Monsieur!" he exclaimed. "No, indeed he is no myth! I have seen him—I saw him (though for the time I had forgotten it) no later than yesterday, and on the very packet which brought me from Brest to Plymouth."

"The Plymouth packet! Why, what was he doing there?" ejaculated Laurent and the old ladies in the same moment.

"I do not in the least know, Mesdames," replied the visitor, "and as I spent all the time of the voyage most miserably in the cabin below, I knew nothing of our distinguished passenger till we were disembarking at Plymouth. But then, as we were massed on the deck, eager for the shore, I heard a compatriot say, 'That's he—that's L'Oiseleur!' And so I saw the personage pointed out—a rather stern, rough-looking man of fifty or so, with thick dark hair, somewhat unshorn, a real Chouan type. Greatly moved, I wished to shake him by his heroic hand, but in the press I could not, and I lost sight of him thereafter."

"Owing to his amulet, perhaps," observed Laurent idly. "But I had a notion that he was quite young, this famous fighter, and that he was a gentleman—titled, in fact. Of course I must have been wrong.—Now, if you will excuse me, mes tantes . . ."

"Yes, I too had previously thought that L'Oiseleur was gently born," said M. de Vicq slowly, "for he bears an old and honoured name—that of La Rocheterie; but this man could not have been a gentleman. Yet that does not prevent——"

"No, indeed!" cried the noble dames, generously waiving the claims of their caste to exclusive leadership. "Think of the great, the sublime, the sainted Cathelineau—a mason's son——"

"Think of Stofflet, a gamekeeper——"

"Think of Cadoudal, think of Guillemot——"

"Think of a salmon!" said Laurent irreverently to himself. And, by concentrating his will-power on that object, he did at last succeed in making his escape.

But as he drove between the high hedges, making for a chosen spot some five miles up the river, he found his mind running, despite himself, on the twenty years of struggle in the never-conquered West of France. He had been too young to take part in its earlier manifestations, and it was only in the last eighteen months or so that these had begun again,

often with the formation of bands of '*réfractaires*,' conscripts who would not serve Napoleon, led by gentlemen who equally refused. And among these was this wellnigh legendary 'L'Oiseleur,' audacious, undefeated, almost invisible, so swiftly and mysteriously did he move and strike—'*jeune homme du plus brillant courage, adoré par ses hommes*,' as Laurent had heard him called. The double encomium was certainly borne out by his famous defence of the mill at Penescouët, where he and eighteen men were said to have kept five hundred Imperialists, troops of the line, at bay for more than four hours, till the soldiers were at last obliged to send for reinforcements, and contrived to burn the place over their heads. And even then the little band had operated a retreat almost more wonderful than their defence.

And now, if M. de Vicq were correct, this gallant fighter was in England, a shaggy, middle-aged peasant, not, after all, the young man of Laurent's own class who had seized the opportunity which he had missed. For it must be rather fine to have contributed by something more than prayers and wishes to restore Louis XVIII to that throne of his ancestors which, in a few weeks, he would almost certainly mount.

(3)

But these reflections were totally forgotten an hour later, when the young Frenchman was standing, in his high leather boots, the water swirling about his legs, casting hopefully over the particular pool in which it was impossible that there should not be a fish.

Maman was right (though he should not tell her so) about the river. It was running so strongly that, as Laurent moved slowly forward, he used considerable caution before he followed one foot by the other, for though he stood in shallow, broken water, there was enough stream to take him off his legs if he trod on a slippery stone or dropped unexpectedly into even a small hole. Nevertheless it was not really the strength of the stream which prevented M. de Courtomer from immersing himself even to the fifth button of his waistcoat, which was then accounted the maximum depth, but the fact that, after a severe cold which had once followed this exploit, he had promised his mother never to repeat it. Indeed, in wading at all he was doing more than the majority of fishermen ever thought of attempting.

The long, twenty-foot rod bent; he cast again a little

farther over the sliding, deeper water near the opposite bank, which there was flat and pebbly, and sprinkled with low shrubs. Yet the deepest part of the channel was below it. . . . No luck, not the ghost of a rise! Perhaps there was a little too much flood after all, though the water was perfectly clear. Laurent thought he would try a change of fly. He reeled up and caught the line.

But as he was detaching the fly he had been using (rather clumsily, for his fingers were cold) he heard, somewhat to his annoyance, quick steps on the pebbles of the other side. He did not desire a possibly loquacious spectator. Finding, however, after a moment or two, that the owner of the steps did not address him, he glanced up.

A young man—a gentleman—was standing on the opposite bank looking at him. As Laurent raised his head he lifted his hat and said, in fair but obviously foreign English, "Can you tell me, sir, where I shall find a bridge across this river? I have deceived myself of the road."

M. de Courtomer recognised in the flavour of the accent and the turn of the idiom an undoubted compatriot, though at first glance the speaker did not look French, particularly in colouring. As he stood there bareheaded the April sun struck warmly on hair of an unusual bronze tint—a hue that had no real trace of red in it, and yet that was not brown. He was tall, carefully dressed, and had a noticeably graceful and easy carriage of the head, and indeed of his whole person. So much Laurent took in before he replied pleasantly:

"There is no bridge, I regret to say, Monsieur, within less than two miles of here. The nearest is at Oakford."

At his replying in French the stranger seemed surprised, as Laurent had quite expected that he would be. "Monsieur also is French?" he enquired in that tongue.

"I have that privilege," replied M. de Courtomer, smiling.

"You seem also, Monsieur, to have that of walking on the water, or pretty nearly," observed the newcomer. "Am I right in supposing that you arrived at your present position from the opposite bank—where I desire to find myself? If you would permit me to join you on your Ararat I could thence gain the shore, could I not?" And he advanced right to the water's edge.

"Good heavens, have a care!" cried Laurent, alarmed. "I am in shallow water here, and have enough ado to keep my feet as it is, but between you and me there is the full force of the current—I don't know how deep the stream is to-day—

and all sorts of nasty holes! Don't think of such a thing, I implore you!"

The stranger looked down at the smooth water, swirling past his feet at remarkable speed. "The stream—yes, I see that it is excessive. But I do so wish myself on that bank! I am walking from Bidcombe to pick up the Bath coach again at Midhampton; and if I have to go out of my way to this bridge of which you have been kind enough to tell me I shall certainly miss it . . . and my valise which I sent on in it."

"But even that is not worth drowning yourself for," protested Laurent, staggering a little as he spoke. "This river is said to claim a life every year; pray do not be the candidate for 1814. The bridge at—Damnation!" He had dropped his fly.

The stream had it in an instant. Laurent stooped involuntarily to grasp at it as it was whirled out of his reach, lost his balance for a second, had to take a hasty step to recover this, slipped on a stone . . . and the stream had him also.

Not without a battle, however, since before it carried him into deeper water he almost contrived to regain his feet . . . but was pulled down again by the driving weight of it. As its cold fury rolled him over and over, struggling and gasping, he had a distinct (but surely erroneous) impression of a shout and a splash from the other bank, quickly forgotten in the stinging interlude which followed, filled to the brim as it was with confused sensations of choking, of a temperature which took his breath away, of thoughts of Maman, of doubts whether he would ever see France now, of a conviction that he must, of course, go with the stream. . . . But it was so difficult to keep one's head above water . . . and he wasn't swimming, he was being hurtled. . . . And then, inconceivably, and yet, in a way, expectedly, he was spluttering in the shallows at the bend, his feet touching bottom in that place where the bank was so eaten away—a difficult place to get out at, but where he now most firmly intended to get out, and that instantly. Only the bank was still above his head, and he still had water to his breast, and the bottom was shelving and slippery. . . . But he managed to catch a bit of the old staking with one hand—and just then something clutched him from behind by the shoulder. . . .

Great God, he *had* jumped in, then! it was no illusion. Yet how, in the name of fortune . . . "There's bottom here!" gasped Laurent, and without loosing his hold of the

staking, grabbed in his turn with his other hand, and discovered that he had his compatriot by the collar.

"Have you found your feet?" he asked, not wasting speech over his own amazement. "Try to catch hold of this piece of wood. Then I will get out somehow, and help you out. But we must be careful—the bank is rotten."

.
"Monsieur, how could you, how *could* you do such a hazardous thing!" panted Laurent. "I . . . really words are ridiculous in face of . . . such an obligation. How you are here at all is nothing short of a miracle. You must have jumped . . . straight into the swiftest part of the current!"

They were both on the bank by this, drenched and coughing . . . and rather like landed fishes themselves. But Laurent had no desire to laugh, for though their situation might be absurd now, it had narrowly escaped being tragic.

The water poured off the would-be rescuer as he raised himself and threw back the soaked hair from which the river had dragged the ribbon—hair longer than was usually to be seen in 1814. "I am here, Monsieur," he replied rather breathlessly, "because you pulled me out, that is plain. How could I stand there watching while the river carried you away! And I accomplished nothing at all—I merely made it more difficult for you to extricate yourself. . . . However, I dare say neither of us was really in danger."

"We *were* in danger," responded Laurent seriously, "and you far more than I. And I had warned you! As to 'accomplishing nothing,' it is the intention which counts in such cases."

His companion was wringing out his sodden locks. "I had the intention of coming across, it is true. Here I am, then; I have saved . . . how much did you say . . . two miles of road?" He suddenly smiled; it was a very attractive smile too.

"I shall always feel, at any rate, that I owe you the debt," said Laurent rather huskily. "And . . . thank God that you did not pay the price which you might very well have paid!" He held out his hand, wrung the wet hand put into it, and then, jumping to his feet, became very practical.

"We must not stay here a moment longer; we will go to the inn near, have a fire, and get our clothes off at once. Yours, Monsieur,"—and as he looked at their deplorable

condition he became aware that their owner wore a red ribbon in his buttonhole; he must have the Cross of Saint Louis, then, but he was unusually young for such a distinction—"yours will never be dry in time for you to continue your journey to Bath. So you will allow me, will you not, the great pleasure of offering you hospitality for the night at least? I live about five miles from here."

"You are very kind indeed, Monsieur," said the dripping young man, hesitating. Then he looked at him frankly. "I should like it greatly . . . on condition that you will not tell any of your acquaintances of my foolish short cut across your river?"

"Conditions of that kind can be discussed later," responded M. de Courtomer, smiling. "At present I think our joint physical condition is what matters. . . . Excuse me if I lead the way."

(4)

Twenty minutes later both adventurers were peeling off their soaked garments before a hastily lit fire in a room of the *Three Trouts*, and shortly afterwards, wrapped in blankets, were ensconced before it in a couple of large chairs, with two steaming glasses beside them. And Walters the groom, to his own surprise, was riding across country on M. de Courtomer's cob to intercept the Bath coach at Midhampton and bring back the French gentleman's valise which it contained—this neat strategic idea having occurred to his master on his way to the inn, when it was borne in upon him that no clothes of his were likely to fit his guest, taller than himself by nearly a couple of inches.

Laurent had just now had, too, the opportunity of verifying what his first impressions had already told him, that his compatriot was an exceptionally well-built young man, with the lithe strength of steel. He had also seen that he wore round his left arm, just above the elbow, a little strip of some plaited or woven substance, not fine enough to be hair. Laurent had only obtained a momentary glimpse of this object, and his curiosity had not been gratified by another; but he had now the prospect of being able to study at leisure the appearance of this strangely made acquaintance, and he proceeded to do so.

He had the clear pallor and fine skin which often go with hair of warm colouring, and his, as it dried, was gradually

resuming its proper shade, the deepest tone of September bracken. Even his eyes, which at a distance looked dark, were seen at closer quarters to be of a deep red-brown. The rest of his features were noticeably straight and delicate and strong; the chin, a little long, curved slightly forward and was squared at the corners, the mouth was firm and sweet—altogether a face of great individuality and charm, without the weakness which sometimes accompanies the latter quality in a man. Laurent took him to be about twenty-six—a couple of years older than himself.

"I do not know," he observed at last, ashamed to scrutinise any longer, "if it is correct to introduce oneself in this unconventional attire. I ought to have done it earlier. My name is Courtomer—Laurent de Courtomer. I have always lived in England."

"And mine," said the other, setting down his glass, "is La Rocheterie—Aymar de la Rocheterie, at your service. For my part, I have always lived in France."

"*What!*" cried Laurent, nearly bounding out of his blanket. "La . . . La Rocheterie . . . L'Oiseleur! You, Monsieur, are L'Oiseleur! Is it possible!"

In a lesser degree his companion also showed surprise. "My name is then known to you, Monsieur? But this is not Brittany!"

"But I am a Frenchman—and a Royalist!" cried M. de Courtomer. "I have known of you, Monsieur, for some time—no, I assure you that your name is not so unfamiliar over here as your modesty assumes. We have heard of the defence of the Moulin Brûlé! Indeed, we were speaking of you only this morning, my great-aunts and I, and a gentleman who thinks he came over with you in the Brest packet. But he said you were . . . It's more than extraordinary! . . . L'Oiseleur, himself, here!"

"*Ma foi*, but this is to find oneself famous!" said M. de la Rocheterie, laughing. "One has, perhaps, the good—or ill—fortune to be known on the other side of the Channel, but over here, who cares for an obscure brigand, as our foes are so fond of calling us?"

Even in his present unusual attire, or absence of it, a young man who looked less like a brigand could hardly be imagined. And the question of birth could be set at rest for ever by the beautifully shaped if sunburnt hands emerging from the blanket. So Laurent, remembering M. de Vicq's picture of the hairy individual 'not a gentleman' whose hand

he had longed to shake, and mindful that he and the Aunts were coming to supper that evening, foresaw an amusing encounter. . . . But—to be sitting here tête-à-tête with this young hero, who had known countless days and nights of hazard and discomfort among the gorse and broom, with only a handful of men and his own wits and courage between him and Napoleon's vengeance . . . and he wrapped in a blanket because he had jumped into the Dart after *him*—it was incredible!

He pulled himself together.

"I believe, Monsieur, that you bear a title, do you not?" he asked, thinking of the introductions he should have to effect.

"A small one—Vicomte. You, Monsieur, perhaps also?"

Laurent named his. "But I do not use it here. When we are in France I suppose I shall have to tack it on again."

"Ah, you are returning, of course?"

"Almost immediately. Yet, since it is not really a return, it will be strange. . . . I was born in England; my father, now dead, married an Englishwoman and settled here in the early days of the Revolution."

"So Madame votre mère is English?" observed the Vicomte de la Rocheterie, with interest. "That then accounts for the perfection of your accent, Monsieur de Courtomer, and also—if as a Frenchman you can forgive me—for an appearance not altogether French. As you stood in the river which has so happily brought us together I had no idea that you were a compatriot."

"You must remember that I have lived all my life in England," said Laurent to this. "That, probably, has even more to do with it. And since we are on the subject of personal appearance, may I say that I never took you for French either—till you spoke? Your hair . . . you will excuse me, I trust? . . . is of an unusual colour for a Frenchman, is it not?"

The young man good-humouredly took hold of a damp bronze lock. "This tiresome stuff? Yes, I believe it is not often met with. Indeed, I have found it inconvenient at times, for that reason; in a tight corner one usually does not wish to be identified. As a matter of fact, I have some Norse blood in my veins, and the . . . the other member of my family who shares that with me has much the same hair. So no doubt it comes from that strain. . . . I hope that the next time I fall into a river I shall be wearing it short, which

is probable, for I only keep it long to be like my Chouans. I wish it would dry." He put up his other hand to his head, and the blanket slipped instantly off his left shoulder and arm.

Before he could replace it Laurent's eyes had involuntarily darted to his elbow—and away again.

"You were looking at my bracelet, Monsieur?" enquired its owner, in his pleasant voice. "Now there, no doubt, is the explanation of my safe navigation of your river. Are you superstitious, Monsieur de Courtomer? No more than I, probably; so I would like you to realise that I wear this ridiculous thing for the sake of other people's superstitions only—I mean, of course, my men's."

And the little half-smile he gave Laurent (he seemed rarely to smile fully) had a tinge of mischief in it.

"I could not help seeing it," confessed the latter, rather red. "And that, then, is the famous charm which makes you invincible. Might I . . . ?"

L'Oiseleur thrust out his arm again for his inspection. The mysterious object upon it resolved itself into a band of plaited rushes or coarse grass, about half an inch wide, fitting just tightly enough not to slip down over the elbow.

"I will make you another confession about that, Monsieur," said its wearer, looking down at it. "It is not even the original *jartier* which is supposed to have been bestowed upon me by the fairy Mélusine or her deputy! In a somewhat rough-and-tumble life a bracelet of rushes will not last for ever, and so I . . . have it renewed from time to time. Still, there is a strand of the original in it somewhere." He smiled again as he made this rather cynical admission, and finished the remains of his punch.

Laurent was examining the talisman with deep interest. "There is no fastening. Then, Monsieur, the . . . the fairy Mélusine plaits it on your arm every time?"

"She does," replied M. de la Rocheterie.

A woman's fingers, of course. Perhaps he was married; but Laurent did not, somehow, think so. He could not pursue further the question of the weaver, and moreover the possessor of the rush bracelet was now looking thoughtfully into the fire.

"And nothing has ever touched you, in all the time you have fought, since you wore that?" asked Laurent after a moment.

L'Oiseleur turned his head, and the enquirer had a little shock of surprise. . . . Or had he merely imagined that a

profound sadness looked for a moment out of the red-brown eyes? It was gone so quickly that he was not sure—gone by the time that his companion answered simply, "Nothing. I have never received a scratch, so I cannot claim the honour of having shed my blood for the King, as so many better men have done."

"Yet," observed Laurent, "the King seems to consider that you have done fully enough for him without that. That ribbon . . ."

"Yes. His Majesty was pleased to send me the Cross last year. Some of my men had better deserved it. *They* had no talisman."

"You must really need a strong head, Monsieur de la Rocheterie, not to believe, after all, in the efficacy of yours! Tell me, if I am not impertinent, whether there is not some one action which will break its power if you happen to do it? In most fairy tales it is so."

"I believe," said the young leader, wrapping himself up again, "that there is some dark story in the past history of this object or its predecessors, but I do not know what moral it is supposed to point. Apart from that—*Morbleu*, what an extraordinary thing! It has just happened to me, and I never gave it a thought!"

"What is it?" asked Laurent eagerly.

"I must never cross running water, except by a bridge, or on horseback, or by some means of that sort. I must never go through it in person. And, to do myself justice—and again in deference to those Chouans of mine—I never have . . . until to-day. But you cannot deny that I have crossed it this morning—water of the most running!"

And he looked at his fellow-adventurer in running water with unfeigned amusement.

(5)

As Laurent de Courtomer tied his stock that evening in his own bedroom, he was both thoughtful and excited. To fall into the river and narrowly escape drowning, to have a total stranger risk his life for him over it, to discover that the stranger in question was someone he knew about and admired, and, finally, to possess him at the moment as a guest under his own roof—these were sufficient reasons why the stock should be well tied . . . and sufficient excuse for the fact that it was not.

Nor had Laurent quite shaken off the shyness which had unexpectedly descended upon him when he was driving home from the *Three Trouts* with L'Oiseleur beside him—that sudden hot conviction that he, with nothing to his credit, had been chattering too freely to this young hero. Had or had not M. de la Rocheterie seemed a little remote, a little withdrawn, during that drive?

A knock at the door, interrupting these cogitations, heralded the entrance of Mme de Courtomer, looking charming but pale. Laurent's heart smote him as he turned round from the dressing-table. She kissed him long and closely; she had not yet got over her emotion.

"I am just going down to the drawing-room, my darling," she said. "I hope M. de la Rocheterie may be there; I want to see him alone. When you brought him to me in the garden I was, I fear, rather selfishly absorbed in thoughts of you and your danger."

Laurent nodded. "He tried to make me promise not to mention what he did, but of course——"

"An absolute stranger, Laurent! And such a risk! I cannot get accustomed to the idea!"

Like her son, Mme de Courtomer seemed a firm believer in the theory of 'intention.' Yet it had already been made perfectly clear to her by M. de la Rocheterie himself that he had in no sense saved Laurent's life.

"Maman," said Laurent, putting his arm round her, "if you can't get some more colour into those cheeks I shall not eat any dinner. Dearest, dearest little mother, I did not do it on purpose!—See now, I am going to kiss them very hard. . . . That's a trifle better! Now go down and thank M. de la Rocheterie for spoiling a very elegant suit of clothes—if he gives you the chance. Unless I have gauged him wrongly, you will not get very far."

"There is one thing that comforts me, Laurent," said Virginia de Courtomer, "and that is, that you would have done just the same in similar circumstances."

"Perhaps," replied her son. "But not so quickly!"

The enlightenment of M. de Vicq and the old ladies that evening was indeed great fun, only it was too soon over, and Laurent was a little afraid of embarrassing his guest, who seemed genuinely averse from anything resembling posing or display. But, probably just because he was so free from self-consciousness and so simply dignified, he took the ensuing

adulation lightly, and yet with a fine courtesy, as if he were aware that he was a young man receiving the homage of the old. If he found the worshippers a little absurd, he did not betray it. The impression which he had produced on Tante Clotilde, even before she realised whom the "Monsieur le Vicomte de la Rocheterie" of Laurent's introduction cloaked, was marked by her making him the suggestion of a curtsy of fifty years ago, with all Versailles behind it—an honour which no Englishman ever received from her. And M. de la Rocheterie had kissed her hand in a manner which also had tradition behind it. Yet more important to Laurent, really, than the unqualified success of his little coup de théâtre, than the joy of being able to whisper to M. de Vicq, "I expect you think, Monsieur, that L'Oiseleur has shaved since you saw him last? I expect he has—but *not to that extent!*" was his mother's murmur to him, just before they went in to supper, "Your Chouan has already enslaved me, Laurent. I think he is charming!"

But now supper was going forward, and M. de la Rocheterie was making obvious efforts to efface himself, to avoid being what he had become, the centre of the little festivity. But with everybody determined to make him so, it was impossible to get out of the position. First of all M. de Vicq's mistake of the packet had to be explained. It appeared that L'Oiseleur *had* come over in it, and that he had heard another passenger being pointed out as himself, "which," as he added with a little smile, "enabled me to escape an attention that I had then no idea I should encounter."

"Ah, Vicomte," interposed Tante Clotilde significantly at this, "you are doubtless in England—am I indiscreet?—on the King's business?"

One felt it almost needed courage to reply, as L'Oiseleur did, "No, Madame; on a purely private matter." However, Tante Clotilde's large face wore the air of one who 'knows better.'

"I think," said M. de Vicq, then addressing him, "that I once had the pleasure, a few years ago, of meeting a gentleman of your name—a good deal older than you, however. Your father, perhaps?"

The young man's face changed subtly. "My father was guillotined with my mother, during the Terror, Monsieur."

It only needed this avowal to complete his prestige in the eyes of the Aunts. A ripple of emotion went round.

"Where did you meet M. de la Rocheterie, did you say,

Laurent?" enquired Tante Clotilde when she had contributed to it.

"In the river, ma tante."

The old lady looked severe, for she did not like being jested with. "Please express yourself more accurately, great-nephew!" So Laurent elaborated, without changing, his statement.

On the heels of the ensuing sensation M. de Vicq asked suddenly whether it was true that the guest possessed, or was popularly supposed to possess, a talisman of some kind.

"Quite true, Monsieur," responded L'Oiseleur soberly. "I really have it—a magic garter, or *jartier*, as the common folk call it." Then he caught Laurent's eye, and smiled. "But its virtue is, of course, all nonsense."

"The popular voice, in short, ascribes to the possession of a charm what is in reality due solely to your own skill and valour!" observed M. de Vicq rather sententiously, but pointing this remark as a compliment by a bow.

"I did not mean that!" said Aymar de la Rocheterie, looking for the first time a trifle disconcerted. "And I spoke too strongly, for undoubtedly my possession of the *jartier* has influenced my men and given them confidence—they are exceedingly superstitious—so in that way the thing has its value. That is, in fact, why I wear it."

"And how did you acquire this *jartier*?" enquired Tante Clotilde massively.

"A witch gave it to me, Madame."

"A witch—a real witch!" exclaimed his hostess. "Oh how, Monsieur de la Rocheterie—and why?"

"The 'why' makes rather a long story, Madame."

"We shall hope to hear it then, after supper," announced Mlle Clotilde de Courtomer in a tone that seemed to settle the whole matter.

"And, perhaps, the whole story of the Moulin Brûlé too?" hazarded M. de Vicq; but L'Oiseleur shook his head with a little smile.

Mme de Courtomer looked from one to the other. "What *was* the Moulin Brûlé?" she enquired of the old gentleman in a low voice.

But it was Tante Clotilde who replied for him. "My dear Virginia—really!—before the hero of Penescouët himself! The details which reached us of that exploit were, I doubt not, inadequate, but surely we all treasure them too securely in our memories to ask 'What was the Moulin Brûlé?'"

Poor Mme de Courtomer, thus brought to book at her own table, before and on account of her guest, flushed, M. de la Rocheterie bit his lip and looked thoughtfully uncomfortable, and Laurent's anger was kindled.

"You forget, I think, *ma tante*," he said as politely as he could, "that my mother, after all, is not French by birth; and it is quite plain that no one can have told her the story, for it is not one which she could ever have forgotten."

"Quite so—very well said!" put in M. de Vicq hastily, and he gallantly monopolised the old lady's attention while the awkward wave in the conversation caused by the boulder she had cast into it spent itself. Indeed Laurent, looking down the table after a moment's silent fight with his annoyance, was relieved to find that the 'hero of Penescouët' was smiling delightfully at his hostess, and heard her say, smiling too, "Will you ever be able to forgive me, Monsieur de la Rocheterie?"

"Madame," replied L'Oiseleur, "you cannot conceive what a relief it is to find that there is one fortunate being in Royalist circles who has not been pestered with the tale of that detestable old windmill! I sometimes wish I had never seen the place!"

When the ladies, following English custom, had left them, M. de Vicq drew in his chair and concentrated his attention on his fellow-guest.

"I remember the Vendée, of course," he remarked, "and the great days of the Chouannerie, Cadoudal's days. You are too young to recall them, Monsieur—but you have relit the sacred fire!"

"No—only fanned the embers," said L'Oiseleur quickly. "The fire is always there. The Breton does not change. Indeed, some of mine are identically the same as those of the great days. And one has the same devotion to rely on, the same obstinacy to combat, the same superstitions to use or respect, and the same kind of warfare."

"That warfare of hedgerows and heather of which one has heard," put in Laurent, his chin on his hands, "and which needs, I imagine, a special aptitude."

"I suppose it does. At any rate, it is the only kind which the Breton really understands. You have to be always on the move; if you have very few men, as I had—at least at the beginning, when I started with twenty-five—that is easy. And if you keep moving you are not only invisible, but the enemy thinks your numbers are much greater than they are.

I have never had more than six hundred men, but they were all picked, and if I had told any one of them to go immediately and cut off his hand the only delay would have been the finding of the chopper. . . . Well, that is all over now. I suppose I ought to say, Thank God. I do say it—but one does not like parting from one's comrades."

"You have disbanded them, then?"

"Not yet. But I shall do so directly the King is actually in Paris."

"The King in Paris!" exclaimed the Baron de Vicq in a rapt tone. And he began a loyal reverie on that theme, to which the two young men listened with becoming patience. Then he reverted somewhat abruptly to the question of L'Oiseleur's amulet, and asked so many questions about it, that in the end M. de la Rocheterie, beginning, Laurent fancied, to be slightly bored, offered to show it to him, and, while M. de Vicq murmured delightedly, "Monsieur, you are really too obliging!" took off his coat with an apology to his host and turned up the sleeve of his fine shirt.

Laurent, leaning back in his chair, his hands behind his head, looked on amused. Little exclamations broke from the old Royalist as, spectacles on nose, he bent over the table and scrutinised the circlet closely. "And that is really the fairy garter of the legend—dear, dear, how wonderful! After all these years . . . so fresh and well-preserved . . . there must be something in it after all! It is indeed to be hoped, Monsieur, that you will never lose that!"

The owner of the *jartier*, with his bare arm stretched out before him on the mahogany, caught his host's eye over the grey head. "Yes, as you say, Monsieur, remarkably well preserved!" And Laurent, smiling back, had a delightful sense of complicity with him. He was not going to tell the old fellow what he had told him.

"My last doubts are removed," murmured M. de Vicq, taking off his spectacles. "Now I know that I really have shaken L'Oiseleur and no other by the hand!"

The bearer of that name, who was turning down his shirt-sleeve, stopped, and flushed very slightly.

"Why, Monsieur, did you think I was an impostor?" he demanded. "Was that why you wanted to see the thing?" And he looked at the old gentleman very straight and challengingly.

Poor M. de Vicq, meeting the spark he had so tactlessly struck out, confounded himself in apologies; on which M. de

la Rocheterie, evidently quickly penitent, but still with a little air not free from hauteur, begged his pardon for having suspected his motive, and, peace being restored, their young host suggested that they should join the ladies.

"Very interesting, that," he thought as he opened the door. "So he's got a hot temper under that quiet exterior of his! I think that, for all his modesty and charm, I should be sorry to take liberties with M. le Vicomte de la Rocheterie!"

(6)

Installed on the sofa in the drawing-room, Tante Clotilde immediately motioned to M. de la Rocheterie to take his place beside her.

"Now, Vicomte, the story you promised us, if you please—the story of the *jartier*!" she said with heavy graciousness.

"I can recall no such promise, Madame," replied L'Oiseleur. "However, if you conceive that it would interest you . . . and M. le Baron," he added, flashing a glance half malicious, half apologetic on that offender, "I will endeavour not to bore you too much." He stirred his coffee for an instant. "You must know, then, that in the district of Penescouët there is a legend of an enchanted garter given in the Middle Ages by that ubiquitous immortal, the fairy Mélusine, to a knight whom it rendered invincible. This garter was said to be still in existence, in the keeping of an old witch in the forest of Armor—we still have witches in Brittany—whom some held to be the fairy Mélusine herself. I must also tell you, if you will pardon a reference to my personal appearance, that this knight—known to after ages only as L'Oiseleur—seems to have been so unfortunate as to possess hair of the colour of mine.

"Well, I had—I have—a specially devoted follower named Jacques Eveno, who comes from the neighbourhood of my little estate at Sessignes. This man, who not only knew the legend, but the old woman too who had the *jartier*, must have begun by wishing that he could procure the lucky talisman for me, but hesitated to steal it for fear the theft should bring misfortune on me. Then he must have pondered how to trick the witch into giving it me of her own free will, and how therefore to inveigle me—at the time perfectly innocent—into playing the part as it should be played. For it seems (but I only learnt this afterwards) that if a young

man with reddish hair came at sunset to her hut with a hawk on his shoulder, and asked for a night's lodging, offering in payment merely a sprig of mistletoe . . . well, he was the dead Fowler come to life again, and she would give him the *jartier* as of right. Eveno, a simple peasant, successfully contrived that all these coincidences should come about—except indeed the finding of the hawk. One afternoon he got me into the heart of the forest on some pretext or other, and deliberately misled me, so that I lost my way and had to ask for shelter at the witch's hut. Knowing her reputation I made no difficulty about his suggestion that I should offer her the bit of mistletoe which he had plucked for me—one learns to humour superstition in Brittany. But the hawk . . . yes, that was strange."

"How did he procure the hawk, then?" asked Tante Odile as he paused.

"He did not, Madame; chance procured it, turning his fraud, for him, into reality . . . and somewhat frightening him, I think. For, as we went through the wood, I came on a young hawk half stunned on the ground, with a broken wing, and I picked the poor bird up and carried it for a while, and ended by putting it (all innocently) on my shoulder, where it stayed. So it was there, quite correctly, when I knocked at the witch's door." He smiled—that most attractive smile of his.

"And the witch, Monsieur—she gave you the charm?"

"Without demur. I was only afraid that she was going to kiss me! She did kiss my hands. You must remember, Mesdames, that at the moment I was completely in the dark, and had no idea for whom she took me, nor why, with the tears running down her wrinkled face, she brought out with such awe from a box of battered and time-blackened silver this little dried twist of rushes. Then the legend suddenly came back to me; and as she and Eveno were by now in a frenzy of excitement, and my protests had no effect, I . . . accepted the talisman, which was, so the wise woman assured me, the identical magic circlet which Mélusine had bestowed on the original L'Oiseleur of whom I was, somehow, a reincarnation. I retain, naturally, my own ideas on that subject, but afterwards, of course, my men always called me by that name."

"And you have the *jartier* still—you wear it perhaps?" asked Mme de Courtomer.

L'Oiseleur bowed. "I always wear it—for my men's

sake. But as it was shrunken with age, and had moreover been cut, I could not wear it where a garter should be worn. So the witch fastened it round my left arm, like a bracelet."

The eyes of all the ladies went to his sleeve. But that it would have been out of place they would all, obviously, have dearly loved to invite the young man to remove his coat. Laurent thought it charming of him not to spoil the story for them by confessing that it was not exactly the original *jartier* which he wore now, and hugged himself to think that he had been the sole recipient of that confidence.

"But what, Monsieur," asked Tante Bonne a little timidly, "was the story of the first owner of the *jartier*?"

"Alas, Madame, I fear that it was tragic. The legends say that he was betrayed by the woman he loved . . . or else that he gave her the garter in obedience to her whim, and in consequence his enemies fell on him and slew him. I am not sure which; but it comes to the same thing."

"I hope——" began Mme de Courtomer rather rashly; and then, checking herself, blushed like a girl.

"Maman, Maman!" said Laurent to himself—and was surprised to see M. de la Rocheterie look across at her without the shadow of offence, and to hear him say, "Merci, Madame, but of that there is no danger!"

A little enigmatic smile just touched the corners of his firmly cut mouth, and Laurent presumed it meant that he was sure that no woman would ever have sufficient power over him to play Delilah.

At any rate no woman—or man either—had the power to get him to talk any more about himself that evening, and the affair of Penescouët went untold . . . till the guests had driven away in the venerable fly which had brought them.

"And now, Maman," said Laurent with a sigh of relief, "M. de la Rocheterie, as a sign that he has forgiven you for your lamentable ignorance, shall tell us two the true story of the Moulin Brûlé. Will you, Vicomte?"

"To save me from the possibility of being crushed like that again, Monsieur?" pleaded Mme de Courtomer, putting out her hand to him.

L'Oiseleur bent his handsome head and kissed it. "You could extort anything from me with that weapon, Madame," he replied. "Let us get it over then!"

(7)

Late that night Laurent, deeper than ever in the toils of hero-worship, stood, candlestick in hand, in his guest's bedroom, and, looking at M. de la Rocheterie as he took the watch from his fob and laid it on the dimity-hung dressing-table, said earnestly, "I hope you will sleep well!"

He himself would dream to-night of those revolving sheets of flame, the sails of the riddled Moulin Brûlé; of the Emperor's soldiers ceasing fire at last, thinking that they were merely wasting ammunition on the holocaust whose heat was too great for them to approach; and of the dozen blackened figures—or, more probably, of one figure in particular—bursting out of that inferno of smoke and blood and, completely surrounded though they were, cutting a way through the stupefied besiegers.

"I suppose you can—sleep in any surroundings," he added, for though he knew that L'Oiseleur must often have spent the night in the open, that reflection was somehow as incongruous as the recital downstairs with this composed and very well-dressed young man now calmly winding up his watch in the best bedroom of Keynton House.

"I much prefer a bed to any other surroundings," replied the Vicomte de la Rocheterie. "Yours, I am sure, is most comfortable." Here, as Laurent afterwards realised, he must have discovered on what a vain employment he was spending his time; but, instead of holding his useless watch to his ear, or otherwise betraying to the man in whose service he had wrecked it, the effect of Dart water upon its interior, he quietly laid it face downwards on the dressing-table, glanced at the mantelpiece to ascertain that there was a clock in the room, and went on, "By the way, Monsieur de Courtomer, I hope my early start to-morrow will not prevent my taking farewell of Mme la Comtesse?"

Laurent reassured him, warning him that, unless he chose to have coffee brought to him in his room, he would have to face an English breakfast. But for this M. de la Rocheterie expressed a preference.

"I trust you have everything you require?" then said Laurent, reluctantly preparing to take his leave. "No, there is one thing that you will need in the morning, Monsieur, and that is a hat. You cannot travel without one, though you can remedy the lack excellently well when you get to

Bath. You must really allow me to supply you with one."

"Thank you," said his guest. "Yes, I suppose that to travel so far bare-headed might excite comment."

"Especially in your case," thought Laurent, though by now he admired the hair en queue. "Do you know Bath, Vicomte?" he asked as an excuse to linger a little.

"No, not at all," returned the traveller.

"It is a prodigious fine place," pronounced Laurent. "I hope I am not impertinent in assuming that it is not—fortunately—for the good of your health that you are going there?"

"No," answered L'Oiseleur, "it is certainly not for my health that I am going to Bath."

He was fingering, with bent head, the seals of his watch lying there. Laurent had the impression that his mouth tightened as he spoke, and got an instant conviction that M. de la Rocheterie's visit to Bath was no pleasure to him. He wondered, not for the first time, what the object of his journey could be, he whose Chouans were still under arms, yet who avowed that he was not on the King's business. And his eyes, following the strong, slender hand, noted the crest on the back of the watch, a swan with its neck encircled by a crown; he even distinguished, on the scroll below, the proud and laconic motto, *Sans tache*. Both pleased him.

Then he made a more determined effort, and bade his guest good-night. There would always be the morning.

But the morning was disappointing, as usually on the occasion of an early start. There seemed no time for conversation, no opportunity for learning any more of the visitor. The inspiration which had come to Laurent of begging the latter to spend a day or two at Keynton House on his way back from Bath proved unfruitful, M. de la Rocheterie explaining that he would probably have to return by London and Dover. It was Mme de Courtomer who had most of L'Oiseleur's attention during the English breakfast, and it seemed to her son that it was not till the last stage of all had arrived, and he was walking down the village beside his guest, with Walters behind carrying his valise, that he had the chance of a word with him; and then there seemed nothing to say . . . just because there was so much. He tried, indeed, to thank him anew for yesterday's act, but even that expression of his feelings was debarred him. Aymar de la Rocheterie declared that thanks for a thing which he had not

done made him feel as fraudulent as he sometimes did over the *jartier*. So Laurent, after murmuring stubbornly, "You meant to save me! I only wish I might have a chance of repaying you some day," had to desist. Then the coach came rumbling in.

"You have promised my mother that when you are in Paris you will give us the pleasure of seeing you, Monsieur," Laurent reminded the traveller. "I want the promise made to me too."

"I do not need to be doubly bound," retorted M. de la Rocheterie, smiling. "And you, Monsieur de Courtomer, when are you coming to Brittany? We have a little river at Sessignes, with indifferent fishing . . . though to be sure I have succeeded in catching excellent trout at Pont-aux-Rochers . . . but that is a good way off."

"I do not need to be tempted by fishing," responded Laurent in his turn. "Some day . . ."

A hearty shake of the hand on both sides, and again that charming smile on L'Oiseleur's, and he was mounting to his place.

". . . At any rate he's got my hat!" reflected Laurent, watching the coach roll off. Then he went rather pensively home.

CHAPTER II

'ROSES, ROSES ALL THE WAY'

"Both faithful and loyal, one grace more shall brim
His cup with perfection: a lady's true lover,
He holds—save his God and his King—none above her."
R. BROWNING, *Which?*

(1)

It is quite possible that Laurent de Courtomer did not miss Devonshire nearly as much as he had anticipated—not, at least, during those first weeks of excitement and fervour which followed Louis XVIII's entry into Paris on that third of May 1814, behind the eight white horses from Napoleon's stable. There were more than enough of interests in his new life for a young Frenchman who had never been in France, let alone in Paris, and for a young Royalist who was not only sharing the triumph of his cause, but who was himself taking possession of his own deserted family mansion in the capital, and negotiating for the repurchase of his father's confiscated estates in the country.

Yet Laurent never quite forgot the young man he had met in the river. He had always a hope that he might run up against the Vicomte de la Rocheterie some day. Nothing, however, had been heard of him since the advent of a very polite note, written before he left England, thanking Mme de Courtomer for her hospitality.

So the strange, novelty-ridden months slipped past, till the autumn evening when Laurent found himself attending the great reception given by the Duc de Saint-Séverin which Royalty itself was gracing, in the person of the Duchesse d'Angoulême. Moreover it was an open secret that the King himself would honour the assembly with a short visit if his gout permitted. M. de Courtomer had gone expecting to be bored (for he understood that there was to be no dancing) and thinking that, after all, Maman, nursing a cold at home,

had perhaps the best of it. But he was not bored . . . after the first half-hour or so.

The tremendous formalities of the Tuileries were not going to be observed in the Hôtel de Saint-Séverin. Though the Duchesse d'Angoulême, stiff and well-meaning as ever, was holding her court for the ladies in a separate room, her Royal uncle, when he came, was merely going to make a tour of the great salon, speaking to a few people here and there; and this in itself was considered extremely gracious of him, seeing how helpless his gout rendered him. In this vast apartment then, dazzlingly lit, yet only half filled by its hundreds of guests, the greater part of whom were men, Laurent talked to his acquaintances and awaited the entry of his sovereign. All at once the buzz of conversation was entirely stilled, and the young man, turning, saw that the doors at the other side of the room were open.

On the threshold stood that short, stout but imposing figure of a King, the pale blue ribbon of the Saint-Esprit across his breast, his gouty legs encased in red velvet gaiters, wearing powder on his grey hair, which was still dressed in the fashion of his youth, with a curl behind each ear and a short queue. . . . Bourbon all over, from the prominent light blue eyes, the aquiline nose, the disdainful mouth, to the heavy double chin . . . the prince who through years of exile and privation had never abated a jot of his pretensions, but had waited for the day of their recognition till the day had come.

He advanced, walking with difficulty but gracious. A little behind him could be seen the unpatrician head of his nephew, the Duc de Berry, and behind him again that of the King's favourite, the Comte de Blacas, tall, cold, dignified and fair. And Louis XVIII had gone but a few steps along the bowing ranks of gentlemen before he beckoned to Blacas, and leant on his arm, for the effort of walking was great. Now and then he stopped and addressed a few words to one or another, on whom every eye was instantly fixed. At first the scene was amusing to Laurent, quite pleasantly free from the apprehension that any Royal conversation would come his way; then he became less interested.

"Who are those officers the King is coming to next?" he enquired of his companion.

"Vendeans or Bretons, most probably," replied the acquaintance. "He means to show them some favour, no doubt, Vendée having ruined herself for the Bourbons, and words being cheaper than pensions."

But Laurent did not hear this cynical comment. Who—*who* was that officer the King was addressing now—a tall, slim figure in dark green? The figure's back was towards Laurent, but he would know that hair in a thousand, even though it were no longer gathered into a ribbon, but cut short like everyone else's! Ridiculously excited, he began to try to work himself a little nearer through the press immediately about him, and, obtaining a new angle of vision, saw the officer's face. It was—it was! and he was looking down at Royalty with just that quiet composure, that complete absence of self-consciousness which seemed his native gift. The King, on the other hand, seemed to be half-playfully scolding him.

At last, after shaking his head at L'Oiseleur with a smile, he passed on, and Laurent saw M. de la Rocheterie, when he raised himself from his bow, say something over his shoulder to one of his companions. M. de Courtomer began hastily to extricate himself entirely from the deeply interested throng in which he was embedded, but by the time he reached the spot where L'Oiseleur had stood, his quarry had disappeared.

Half an hour later, however, he came on Aymar de la Rocheterie again, quite unexpectedly, in a smaller and only half-populated room. At one end was a sort of alcove with a swinging lamp, and here he was standing talking to a beautiful woman in green and silver, dark and tall and animated, who was making much play with a fan. Laurent could hardly go and interrupt; but he reflected that if he waited he might have a chance of catching L'Oiseleur's attention, or of following him. And as, with this object, he remained near the door, he overheard a conversation.

"Monsieur du Tremblay," said a woman's voice, "you know him—M. de la Rocheterie, I mean—you are almost a neighbour; do tell us whether that is a case for congratulation?"

Laurent turned at once to see who the man who knew L'Oiseleur might be, and recognised one of the officers from the group in the salon—the very one, he fancied, to whom he had seen La Rocheterie speak—a good-looking man of about five and forty. This gentleman now replied to the lady who had questioned him, "Oh no, Madame; not to my knowledge—no, I should think certainly not."

"L'Oiseleur's heart is in his own keeping?"

"Either that, or—but I am not in his confidence—in that of the cousin with whom he was brought up. But she is married to an old roué, though she does not live with him."

"Where does she live, then?"

"Like La Rocheterie, with his grandmother, at his château of Sessignes."

The lady opened her eyes wide, and a gentleman with her observed dryly, "*Très commode pour que le beau cousin la console!*"

M. du Tremblay shook his head. "Nothing of the sort, I assure you. La Rocheterie has a very cold temperament; there has never been a breath of scandal. Moreover the attachment is all hearsay."

"But it will add the last touch to L'Oiseleur's vogue," said the lady meditatively—"an unfortunate love affair!" And her companion observed, "One knows those 'cold temperaments.' Their owners sometimes do the most astonishing things."

M. du Tremblay smiled. "Not La Rocheterie, I think. The cousin, Mme de Villecresne, is, by the way, the heroine of a little story which may interest you. During the fighting last year, knowing that La Rocheterie was in great need of definite information as to whether there were or were not Imperialist troops in a certain little town—it was Chalais—she deliberately drove into it in her carriage with her maid and a trunk or two, as though she were travelling, discovered that there were troops there—since they stopped her—and sent off the maid with the news to L'Oiseleur. The Imperialists were very angry when they found out, too late, how they had been outwitted."

"Ah, surely she was in love with him!" deduced the lady, her eyes fixed on the alcove, while "Rather a dangerous game to play," commented the male hearer. "—Tell me," he went on, "do you consider that La Rocheterie deserves the military reputation he has acquired?"

"Certainly," replied M. du Tremblay. "He's a fine leader, with just that dash of recklessness in his caution—or of caution in his recklessness—which is so disconcerting to an enemy. It is a pity that his talents have not had wider scope."

Laurent, who had been listening avidly, felt very kindly towards this generous appreciator. The lady, still pensive over the possible love affair, asked where the roué husband lived, to which M. du Tremblay replied that when last he had heard of him he was in England, at Bath.

Bath! Illumination broke upon M. de Courtomer; he almost betrayed that he was listening. But at that moment

La Rocheterie caught sight of him. His face lighted up, he said a word to his fair companion, and came quickly towards Laurent, holding out his hand.

"My dear Comte, how delightful! I had a hope that I might meet you here. Come and let me present you to Mme de Morsan."

To tell truth, Laurent would much have preferred him without the lady, who was so resplendent, though in perfectly good taste, that she rather alarmed him. But in a moment he was bending before her, a few commonplaces passed, and then, to his disappointment, he was alone with her, for the Vicomte Mathieu de Montmorency, the Duchesse d'Angoulême's *chevalier d'honneur*, suddenly appeared and signified that the Princess wished to speak to the Vicomte de la Rocheterie, and L'Oiseleur, with a tiny shrug of his shoulders, was obliged to go.

"What it is to be famous!" said Mme de Morsan, letting her fine eyes roam over his substitute. "Shall we sit down, Monsieur de Courtomer, and await my cousin's return?"

They sat. So she was a cousin too!

"Ce cher Aymar," resumed Mme de Morsan, "he really has no liking for being a lion. And one would fancy that what he has done in Paris would sensibly cloud the sun of Royal favour. On the contrary, here is Her Royal Highness sending for him. But possibly, with her detestation of all things revolutionary, that is precisely why."

Laurent asked what he had done.

"You did not hear? They were talking of nothing else in the great salon a little while ago. Yesterday he refused the Legion of Honour, which the King wanted to give him in addition to his Cross of St. Louis, and this evening he stuck to his refusal—very respectfully, of course—to the King's face."

"I saw the conversation," said Laurent, "though I could not hear it. His Majesty did not seem displeased."

"No, oddly enough, he was not. And, after all, it is Napoleon's decoration, even if he chooses to bestow it. He scolded M. de la Rocheterie . . . but what more flattering than a Royal scolding? It is enough to make Aymar the rage in Court circles, much more than his military exploits. But, as I said, he has small taste for that sort of thing."

"M. de la Rocheterie refused the Legion of Honour because of its associations, then?"

"I suppose so. He has the strangest ideas! His parents were both guillotined, one must remember, and so——" Mme

de Morsan shrugged her shoulders. "Did I understand, Monsieur, that you had met in England?"

Laurent told her how.

"He jumped in?—Just like Aymar! For all that quiet tenacity of his he adores taking risks. . . . You know, Comte," she went on after a moment, "the risk he took when he openly defied the Emperor in 1813 was out of all reason—one young man alone against all the military authorities of the district. You have heard about that—no? They were trying to arrest him at last because of his refusal to enter the Emperor's guard of honour. He was surprised at Sessignes—his home—and rather than be taken, which would have meant either submission to Napoleon's wishes or a fortress . . . for him, of course, a fortress . . . he leapt straight out of the window before their eyes, swam the river, and took to the woods. He had outlawed himself; still more so when he sent a letter to the sous-préfet, saying briefly, 'Napoleon wishes me to fight; very well, I will fight!' He had no followers at all when he sent that challenge. . . . But you will think that I can talk of no other man! Let us speak of someone else—yourself, for instance, Monsieur de Courtomer!"

They talked small talk. Then, to Laurent's relief, an elderly man came and bore off Mme de Morsan, who went rather reluctantly, but not, Laurent was aware, because she was leaving *him*. But, since it was just possible that L'Oiseleur would return thither, the young man waited in the alcove. And before very long, to his great pleasure, he saw him making his way through the room again.

"I am lucky to find you still here, Monsieur de Courtomer," he remarked with a little smile, sitting down by him. "I was afraid that you might be gone." On the disappearance of Mme de Morsan he bestowed not even an enquiry.

"Your cousin," Laurent informed him, "was carried off a little while ago."

"Mme de Morsan is not my cousin," replied M. de la Rocheterie a trifle curtly. "She is the widow of a nephew of my grandmother's, Edouard de Morsan, a rather distinguished scholar in his day.—Well, Comte, did you catch any more salmon or pull any more rash persons out of the river before you left England? And how is Madame votre mère, and your venerable aunts?"

"I hope you mean to satisfy yourself personally on that score," replied Laurent. "They will all be delighted to see you, particularly my mother."

“She is not here, then? I hope indeed to give myself the pleasure of calling on them. I should have done so already, but somehow a provincial always finds so much business to transact on his rare visits to Paris, and mine have been very rare of late.”

Provincial indeed! Where was there any trace of that? Too shy to refer to the affair of the Legion of Honour, or even to ask him about his recent interview with the Dauphine, Laurent looked at the Cross of St. Louis over La Rocheterie’s heart, where previously he had only seen the ribbon—the white cross sown with fleur-de-lys, where on a crimson ground the royal saint held in one hand a crown of laurels, in the other the crown of thorns and the nails. How strikingly his uniform with its high collar and the black stock inside set off his clear, pale face, his lithe figure, and the hair like September bracken. Laurent did not wonder that his ‘cousin’ frankly admired him. Did he admire her? From the way in which he had repudiated their relationship, apparently not.

L’Oiseleur noticed his gaze. “I’m not the wild Chouan any more, you see,” he said, smiling and running his hand over his head. “But I should not be surprised if, when you come and visit me in the spring—as I hope I may persuade you to do—I am not condemned to wearing those long locks again.”

“Why, you do not anticipate fighting again, surely?”

“No, no; and if there were I could hardly grow them to order in a day or two. But my grandmother, who is very much ancien régime, greatly prefers the queue to which she was accustomed—in my father for instance. So when I return, as I shortly shall, to my rustic solitudes, I may have to let my hair grow again to please her. But I drew the line at showing myself in Paris in times of peace like that!”

(“Some men with his reputation would cling to the singularity,” thought Laurent; “I was sure he hated display.”)

“Your men are disbanded now, I suppose?” he enquired.

“Yes, the Eperviers exist no longer.—Did I tell you that they called themselves the ‘Hawks’—I suppose because of the name of ‘Fowler’ that came to me with the *jartier*. But I am a peaceful country gentleman now, and keep pigeons, not hawks.”

“But you have your swan—or swans perhaps?” observed Laurent, thinking of his crest.

L'Oiseleur looked surprised for a moment; then he smiled. "Ah, I see. Yes, we bear seven on the coat. That is where the name of Sessignes comes from—Sept-Cygnés. There are wild ones on the river sometimes. But I hope you will see them for yourself."

Why, when he spoke, of his home, did his face seem, ever so little, to cloud? It struck Laurent that his good spirits, though evidently unassumed, did not go very deep. Perhaps he had terrible memories from childhood? He stole a glance at his profile—strangely sensitive, for all its vigour and resolution. But, puzzling or no, he was more attractive than ever.

Peste! here was that Mme de Morsan back again, on the arm of her cavalier, and her voice saying, "My dear Aymar, I want to hear everything Her Royal Highness said to you!" and, though they both begged him to remain, Laurent excused himself. He should see M. de la Rocheterie later at the Hôtel de Courtomer.

About a quarter of an hour later he drifted past the room again on his way out. It was empty now, so his glance, reminiscently, went clear to the other end. But it was not quite empty, for the couple were there still, standing under the lamp. And, thought M. de Courtomer with all the worldly experience of four-and-twenty, as Mme de Morsan's languorous expression and half-mocking smile smote themselves into his perceptions, 'if ever a woman was set on a man, she is on him!' But he hesitated to add that the reverse was true, for L'Oiseleur was undisguisedly frowning at her, with that peculiarly straight gaze he had when he was angry—as witnessed by Laurent in his own dining-room across the Channel. Unless, of course, it was a lovers' quarrel. They made, indeed, a most striking pair—but somehow he did not want . . . How ridiculous for him to assume a critical attitude to the Vicomte de la Rocheterie's *affaires de cœur* . . . if he had any.

(2)

L'Oiseleur did pay his call at the Hôtel de Courtomer, but, enormously to Laurent's disappointment, it was when he himself happened to be out. Mme de Courtomer reported that he had said he was on his way back to Brittany in a day or two, so Laurent concluded that the last picture he would have of him would be of his standing with the lady in

green and silver under the filigree lamp, looking so deeply annoyed.

But two days later, as he chanced to walk down the Tuileries garden, he caught sight, amid a tolerable crowd, of two people in front of him who gave him a start. He saw only their backs; but one undoubtedly was L'Oiseleur's. Yet he had on his arm a lady who was obviously not Mme de Morsan. For one thing, she was not so tall—she only came up to her escort's shoulder; for another, from below her bonnet escaped a tendril of bright bronze; and for a third, Aymar de la Rocheterie's own head was bent down towards her in a way it had shown no sign of doing to Mme de Morsan. They were obviously talking very intimately—so intimately that the self-denying Laurent slackened his faster pace lest he should overtake them; and they were soon lost in the crowd.

Was that the real cousin, the heroine of the exploit at Chalais, the member of his family who shared his Northern blood—the lady whose unhappy marriage to a roué might very well have been the cause of his visit to England, the lady who had . . . perhaps . . . the charge of his heart?

This question Laurent asked of the unresponsive façade of the Tuileries as he strong-mindedly returned towards it. For the answer to it he would have to wait now till the spring . . . and the spring would be a deuced long time in coming.

(3)

But it was not. The winter—gay, despite almost universal discontent—passed very swiftly in Paris. Laurent went out a great deal, and already the Aunts said that it was time he should think of marrying, particularly as his English grandfather, who died in the autumn, had left him nearly all his money. His mother laughed and replied, “Wait till he sees a lady he likes,” to which Tante Clotilde responded “Virginia, that is not the way things are done in France! It is your—our—duty to find a suitable match.” And Mme de Courtomer promised that she would try.

Yet had she really made any matrimonial plans for her son they could hardly have been followed up that spring. The bombshell of Napoleon's landing at Cannes on March 1st would have cast them into as much confusion as it did the whole organisation of the newly established régime. But

Laurent's mind at least was not troubled by divided counsels; he was off to join the Royalists of the West. Nothing could stop him from seizing this unexpected chance of proving his loyalty, and Mesdames Tantes, at all events, were not likely to do anything in that direction. They gave him benedictions and scapulars. His mother tried not to show her heart. The leader of all others whom he longed to join was, of course, L'Oiseleur in Brittany—he imagined that he would spring at once to arms—but, not having heard anything of him since the autumn, and not knowing whether he himself would prove a welcome recruit, he abandoned the idea.

Moreover, directly it became known that the Duc de Bourbon was being sent to the Loire, it seemed plain to Laurent and all his like-minded friends that Vendée, and not Brittany, would prove the centre of resistance; and so, having had the good fortune to procure a personal introduction to the Vendean general, Comte Charles d'Autichamp, who held the military command at Angers, he and a few others set off thither, full of enthusiasm, to lay their swords, through him, at the feet of the Duc d'Enghien's father.

CHAPTER III

IN THE DUST

"La blessure intime et profonde qui assombrit une âme noble, qui la fait se redresser pleine d'orgueil et de haine . . ."

RENÉ BOYLESVE, *Mademoiselle Cloque*.

"Yea, twofold hosts of torment hast thou there,
The stain to think on, and the pain to bear."

Œdipus Rex (Gilbert Murray's translation).

"I would not hear your enemy say so,
Nor shall you do my ear that violence
To make it truster of your own report
Against yourself . . ."

Hamlet, Act I. Sc. 2.

(I)

ON Monday, the first of May 1815, a fresh, cloudless afternoon, a young man in the Vendean uniform, holding by the bridle a sorrel horse, stood at the fork of a road not far from Locmélar in Brittany, and peered up at a rough and almost illegible signpost. The young man was Laurent de Courtomer, who, until about half an hour ago, had been in possession of a happiness as unclouded as this May sunshine—and who was still enjoying himself.

The misunderstandings and delays in Vendée, the fiasco of the Duc de Bourbon's short sojourn in the West, his precipitate departure, first from Angers and then from Beaupréau, because some of the leaders, M. d'Autichamp himself chief among them, thought the time not ripe for a rising, and were nervous for the safety of the old man's princely person—all this had very much irked M. d'Autichamp's aide-de-camp, Comte Laurent de Courtomer. And towards the end of April that aide-de-camp became so restive that his general had to find him some employment. He gave him, therefore, a despatch to carry to North Brittany, to M. de Pontbriand and the rest of the Chouan leaders there, not disguising his doubt whether Laurent would ever succeed in reaching them, nor his conviction that he would fail to return across the

Loire. The young man was authorised, in that case, to join one of the Breton chiefs if he pleased; "not," added M. d'Autichamp, "but that I should prefer to have you back again with me, in the event of our moving later on."

Laurent went off in high feather. Moreover, he succeeded in reaching his destination, delivered his despatches, which did no more than set forth a general desire on the part of the Vendean chiefs for such co-operation as was possible with their comrades on the right bank of the Loire, and was complimented on the address he had displayed. Elated by his good fortune, and seeing that nothing but the merest skirmishes had as yet taken place between the Royalists and the Imperialists, and that he was now unencumbered with despatches, he determined to return by a different and rather less secure route—through the Penescouët district in fact, though he was warned against it. For that was L'Oiseleur's country, and it might so well be that he should come up against him somehow—the figure out of a fairy-tale, with the hawk and the mistletoe—in his real surroundings. If he got only a glimpse of him it was well worth the risk . . . if there were extra risk, which he did not believe when he set out.

However, he thought rather differently about that now, and quite differently about his chance of meeting L'Oiseleur. For, having ridden all morning happily and expectantly through the deep Breton lanes, he came at noon to a solitary little inn which had been recommended to him. It was kept by a very lame young man. His face had clouded over at Laurent's enquiry as to L'Oiseleur's possible whereabouts.

"You have not heard, then, Monsieur? Alas, L'Oiseleur met with a great disaster last week at the Pont-aux-Rochers, over Plumauden way. Three days ago it was—last Friday morning. His men were ambushed by the Blues, and nearly all captured or killed. It is terrible . . . he who had so often entrapped them."

"Good God!" said Laurent, staring at him. It was the very last piece of news for which he had been prepared. "And . . . L'Oiseleur himself?" he asked, his heart beating fast.

"Escaped, Monsieur, it is believed. He has the *jartier*, you know. But he can have few men left now, and it is not known where he is. I wish I could join him; I should have done so long ago but for this." He pointed to his shrunken leg.

It was all the news he could give. Laurent rode very soberly away. He had only been thinking of success for his

friend—for sometimes he ventured privately so to call him. And this—at the very outset of the campaign! Still, if La Rocheterie himself had escaped, as was rumoured, that was chiefly what he cared about. If he could only be sure of that; for that he should meet him now was a thousand times more unlikely than before. He must be in hiding—pursued perhaps. . . . And the desire to meet him, to share his danger, grew with every second that Laurent frowned at the signpost.

As it was impossible to read it he stooped at last to do what he had in reality dismounted for, take a stone out of the sorrel's shoe. He had just dislodged the obstacle when he heard a sound that made him raise himself sharply. Yes, not more than two hundred yards away, trotting up the sloping road on his left towards the signpost, was a patrol of Bonapartist cavalry—red and green hussars. And here he was, dismounted, in uniform, full in their view!

He did not long remain so, at least—he was in the saddle and dashing along the road in front of him as hard as he could go; and as he went he thought, "This has solved the problem of the choice of road anyhow! What a fool I was . . . but it is rather good fun, all the same!" He could not see the hussars yet over his shoulder, but from the sounds and shouts they were certainly after him. However, he had a good horse, and though there was nothing to take from him now save his liberty, he was not going to make them a present of that if he could help it. And what if he were to make across country? The bank here was no more than an English hedgerow. He set the sorrel at it.

.

Laurent was staring up into blue sky, and everything was going round. The sensation having been his once before, he knew of course what had happened—a fall out hunting.

But why was someone kneeling on his chest and pinning his arms down? It was a curious way of succouring an accident in the hunting-field; he could not breathe.

"Damn you, get off me!" he said angrily and indistinctly in English.

"Tiens, c'est un Anglais!" exclaimed a surprised voice.

But Laurent was soon able to explain the falsity of this deduction. The hussars helped him up, disarmed and searched him, finding little. The officer said courteously, "You have a deep scratch on your forehead, Monsieur,

taken, no doubt, from the hedge when your horse fell with you.—One of you tie it up, and then we must be getting on.”

It appeared that no shot had been fired, no blade unsheathed. His horse had fallen at the leap, and then they had come and sat on him; thus ingloriously was Laurent de Courtomer made a prisoner. Even the blood which was now trickling rather copiously down his cheek had been drawn by nothing more lethal than a broken bough. He was a little savage, but there was no profit in ill-temper. His captors were quite pleasant; one of them tied up his forehead with his handkerchief, and then they mounted, fastened his bridle to one of theirs and trotted back the way they had come. It seemed that they were out scouting from a considerable distance, and knew little of happenings in this neighbourhood, beyond the bare fact that there had been a Royalist defeat there a few days ago. And so, said Laurent to himself, ends my dream of meeting with La Rocheterie. Seeing what it had brought about, he almost regretted having indulged it.

As evening drew on, they entered a village to water the horses. The officer went into the inn. M. de Courtomer was by now beginning to revolve the chances of escape, but his captors were pretty wary. It was best at least to appear resigned, so he sat most meekly on his slightly lamed steed between his guards at the village trough, speculating as to what the village was, and where, for he had lost his sense of direction. And, thus engaged, he found himself all at once observing the slow approach of a farm cart along the one street of the place—an ordinary and rather small cart drawn by an old white horse, but driven, oddly enough, by a soldier, and having another, with fixed bayonet, seated sideways on the edge. That there was something unusual about this conveyance was shown by the fact that everyone whom it passed in its progress over the cobbles was straightway smitten with immobility and remained staring after it. Laurent himself became curious to see what was in it.

As the cart came within range, the hussars at the horse-trough began to call out pleasantries to the grenadier driver: what was he taking to market; it was true he looked better suited to a farm than the army, and so on.

“You look like a performing circus!” retorted the grenadier. “We have a prisoner in here; that’s what we’ve got.” Yet he had his musket idly between his knees and a straw in his mouth.

"We've got one too!" replied the hussars. Then the cart came abreast. On its tailboard, let down nearly level at the back, was visible an inert head and shoulders. And the sun of the Mayday evening shone on hair that Laurent knew, hair that fell back from the face like death—like tragic death . . . Aymar de la Rocheterie's.

Laurent gave a sharp exclamation, and the sorrel responded to the half automatic pressure of his knees. A hussar at once seized his arm, and a pistol was pressed into his ear, with an enquiry as to whether he wished to join 'that one' in the cart with a bullet in his head? He did not answer; he was too stunned. But he made no further movement.

The cart rumbled slowly past with its burden. L'Oiseleur was plainly quite unconscious, if not dead; his head rolled slightly with the comfortless motion of the conveyance. On the mortal pallor of his face there showed up a faint smear or two of blood, and the white dust of the country road had drifted into his loosened hair, together with some bits of the straw on which he had been laid. A dark green uniform coat, similar to that in which Laurent had last seen him, was flung over him, but his shirt had obviously been removed, and one shoulder at least was swathed round with a bloody wrapping. And the sunlight showed how deeply stained was the coat also.

Before Laurent had recovered from his stupefaction the cart had passed. All the hussars turned in their saddles and looked after it, oddly silent, except one irrepressible spirit who shouted out an enquiry as to why they were going like a funeral.

"To avoid one, son of an idiot!" called back the man with the musket. "We happen to want this parishioner alive. It's a damned nuisance, going at this pace, but if we hurry——" He made an expressive gesture.

"Where are you taking him to?"

But either the soldier did not hear, or did not answer because the hussar officer came at that moment out of the inn shouting an order. And hastily, with much jingling of accoutrements, the patrol began to move off up the sunny street in the opposite direction, Laurent in the midst.

He was feeling very dismal. Rumour was incorrect, and L'Oiseleur *had* paid in person for his defeat—and paid heavily. He had fallen with his men after all . . . no, hardly, because the affair at the bridge was three days old, and the blood on him was fresh. He must have been tracked

down afterwards . . . horrible! But how strange that there was no escort with the cart—for though L'Oiseleur himself was only too obviously in no condition to escape from it, there must always be the risk of a rescue so long as any of those devoted followers of his were at large. Or did the absence of an adequate guard signify that the whole of his remaining force had since been wiped out—and was that the meaning of the look, almost of horror, which had persisted even in unconsciousness? Laurent could not get that look out of his head, nor the way the cart had jolted. Surely, if they wanted him kept alive, that soldier might have held him in his arms; surely——

The young man gave an exclamation. Slow-witted dolt that he was! "I must speak to your officer at once!" he said to the hussar who had command of his reins.

But it took time, in that quickly trotting advance, before his demand could be complied with, and already when he proffered his suggestion it seemed absurd, seeing that by then the cart with its burden and he, who was not a free agent, were a mile or more apart. So the officer not unnaturally replied that it was out of the question to send him back now to bear the other prisoner company.

(2)

To a young man deeply conscious of how unwelcome it is to be made a captive it is not likely to occur that he may also be unwelcome to his captors. This fact was nevertheless made plain to Laurent next morning, when the officer came into the barn where M. de Courtomer had spent the night with the patrol, and told him frankly that he was becoming a nuisance to them. They wished to return with all possible speed to headquarters, yet the sergeant reported that the strain taken by the prisoner's horse in its fall yesterday was much worse. The officer really wished, he avowed, that he *had* bestowed his captive in the cart with the other; he proposed now, instead of dragging him further with them on his lame beast, to hand him over to the care of the garrison at Arbelles, which was still within a few hours' ride.

Laurent replied indifferently that he must do as he thought best. He had passed a haunted night; had La Rocheterie lived to see this day break? He doubted it.

The crux came over the question of parole, which was

required of him because only one hussar could be spared to take him to Arbelles; and in the end Laurent agreed to give it until he was in the hands of his new gaolers; and so, fettered by his word, he set out in a corporal's charge. But he was feeling too much depressed this morning to care to think of a dash for freedom. He had had his wish; he had seen L'Oiseleur, and doubted if he should see him more in this life. And about midday, riding slowly because of the sorrel's condition, he and the corporal came in sight of their destination, the château of Arbelles, a really fine and extensive Renaissance building, capable of containing, as it then did, a considerable number of troops, though plainly not designed for any warlike end. It belonged, Laurent subsequently discovered, to a Royalist gentleman absent in Paris, and during his progress up the avenue the prisoner wondered how long, under military occupation, it would retain its general air of well-kept luxury, almost that of a big English country-house.

In the imposing hall, with its great oriel window and vast hearth, he was delivered over to a tall major of the line of a lifeless and, as Laurent privately thought, stupid visage. The hussar made his report and handed over Laurent's papers. The officer was looking at them in a slow, undecided way, when a quick step was heard and he turned round and saluted a big, burly hard-faced man in the green and yellow of the dragoons—a man with a choleric eye and close-cut grizzled side-whiskers coming to the level of the cheekbone. To him Laurent was presented as a prisoner on parole just sent in.

"But I take back my parole, sir, now that I am in your hands," put in the captive quickly.

The dragoon colonel gave a mirthless smile. "As you please, Monsieur—" he looked at the papers, "Lieutenant le Comte de Courtomer, is it not? You have a report, corporal?"

The corporal made it, and the Colonel proceeded—quite civilly—to question his prisoner. But the fact that Laurent, when captured, had been coming from the north, as he readily acknowledged, appeared to annoy the commander of Arbelles, whose preferences seemed to be for a prisoner from the southwest. Could not M. le Comte give him any inkling of what was going forward in the Plesguen district? Laurent intimated that he was totally unable to do so, not having been there; nor, he added coldly, did he see that he was called upon to present such information to an enemy if he had had it.

And the Colonel did not press the point; he muttered something cryptic to the impassive Major about having patience and waiting a little longer. After which, looking at the handkerchief round Laurent's brow, he observed almost solicitously, "You are wounded, I see, Monsieur le Comte. You must have that attended to. Where is M. Perrelet?"

A young, loose-limbed lieutenant of *chasseurs à cheval* standing by said, with a significant lift of the eyebrows, "Still in that room, sir."

"Ah," said his superior. "Well, I hope he is in it to some purpose. I think that this officer, then, had best go up there to M. Perrelet, to have his hurt dressed, and meanwhile we can consider where to lodge him.—We are rather full for the next few days; you must excuse us, Monsieur le Comte."

"I am your prisoner," responded Laurent rather stiffly, disliking the effect which his title appeared to be making on this certainly not aristocratic foe.

"Rigault," said the latter to the young officer who had spoken, "take a couple of men and conduct M. de Courtomer upstairs. I am to understand that you definitely withdraw your parole now, Monsieur?"

"Definitely, Monsieur le Colonel."

But when the chasseur returned with two soldiers, the Colonel announced that he had changed his mind, and would go with the prisoner himself, as he wished to speak to the doctor.

They mounted the noble staircase together. At the top they met an orderly, of whom the Colonel asked if M. Perrelet were along *there*, indicating a certain passage. The man replied that the surgeon had just left the room for a moment, but would soon return; on which his commanding officer told him to inform him that there was a captured Royalist officer there awaiting his services. Then, followed by the two soldiers, he went down the passage with his prisoner, talking as he went.

"I must apologise, Monsieur de Courtomer, for asking you to see the doctor in this particular room, but he is very much taken up with a wounded prisoner who occupies it, and he has his dressings and so forth there. But of course I shall have you put elsewhere when he has done what is necessary for you."

"Oh," said Laurent cheerfully, "I am not averse to company, sir, if the prisoner in question is not too ill for it."

The Colonel shrugged his shoulders. "It is not on his

account that I would not quarter you there, though he is very ill, but on quite another—that on which I really feel apologies are due to you for being required to spend even a few minutes in his society.” He broke off as he stopped at a door on his right hand, and beckoned to the soldiers. “One of you must stand sentry here while this officer is within, and the door must be locked, now. . . . No,” he resumed to Laurent, his hand on the door-knob, “I should not dream of leaving you with this man, officer of your own side though he is, for I am sorry to say he has just turned traitor—betrayed his own men into an ambush four days ago, and was himself shot yesterday by those that were left.” And, seeing Laurent’s look of incredulity and aversion, he added, “Yes, he was found tied up to a tree, all but dead, outside his own headquarters. The doctor, at my request, has been doing his best for him since yesterday evening, but it seems doubtful if he will live . . . fortunately for himself, perhaps.”

He turned the handle of the unlocked door and motioned the now reluctant Laurent in. “With apologies!” he said once more.

The door shut again, the key turning. And on its inner side Laurent de Courtomer, appalled, stood staring . . . staring . . . fighting with all his mind against the evidence of his eyes. . . .

(3)

The bronze hair was scattered on the pillow. Except for brows and lashes the only trace of colour in the upturned face that it surrounded was the blue stain beneath the shut eyes, for the shut lips had none. But the blood and dust which had disfigured that visage yesterday were gone; it was now so utterly bloodless that it had become mere sculpture, too fine-drawn for life—a little severe, almost disdainful. Lying there so straight and motionless and low, Aymar de la Rocheterie, in the hands of his enemies, had the aspect of a dead Crusader.

And it was of *him* that vile thing had just been said, the other side of the door!

Laurent stood petrified. He felt himself guilty, polluted, a party to that terrible lie. His instant impulse was to cry to the still figure, ‘Forgive me for having even heard it—for not having had time to deny it for you . . . this idea of a madman! *You* betray your men!’ Then the knowledge

swamped him like a flood to what deaf ears he would cry. L'Oiseleur was . . . surely . . . dying.

Oh, why had he not tried sooner to go with him yesterday? Now it was too late. There was no visible lift of breathing under the bedclothes, smoothly disposed as they were up to the very chin. And, pierced with an even keener pain than yesterday's, Laurent went nearer to the bed, drawn as by a magnet to something he was half afraid to approach, remembering Devonshire and the bright salmon river, the stranger who had so lightly risked his life for him, who had shown him the amulet—the useless amulet—the brilliant friend he had re-encountered in Paris, the lover he had guessed at in the Tuileries garden. Was this to be the end of all that charm and vigour and young renown?

And at that moment, as if to answer him . . . but in what sense? . . . Aymar de la Rocheterie opened his eyes and looked at him.

Laurent suffered a double shock, since, apart from their unmistakable warm red-brown colour, they did not seem to be L'Oiseleur's eyes at all. They were immensely large and even lustrous, but they had no life in them, nor, as Laurent almost instantly realised, any power of recognition worth the name. They might have seen something, but it certainly was not he. For the space of ten heart-beats or so they remained open; then the lashes fell again on to the blue circles and so stayed. There was no other movement.

Thank God, he was still alive then! But why, in this extremity, had he been left alone? The Colonel had said that they were doing their best to save him. There seemed a quantity of objects to that end on the table by the bed; the grey-panelled, well-furnished room with its two windows—a sitting-room evidently—was very pleasant; there was a little fire burning; the bed itself, even if narrow, had fine linen sheets and an embroidered counterpane. But for all that it was patent that he who lay in it lay very near the brink of a swifter river than the Dart. That indeed Laurent had guessed and feared yesterday; but the other dark flood lapping at him—the atrocious calumny—how was that to be stayed? Yet, if Aymar de la Rocheterie were dying, so long as *he* had a tongue in his head he should not die sullied by so horrible a charge.

And, with a rapidly beating heart, he found himself away from the bedside staring through the window. How *dared* they say such a thing? As he asked himself the question the

key turned in the lock. A sharp voice outside said rapidly, "Sentry? nonsense! I won't have one here, tell the Colonel!—Another prisoner waiting for me? Yes, I know." And the speaker entered, a short, stout, more than middle-aged man in civilian attire, with a pair of rather fierce eyes under shaggy grizzled brows. He threw a quick glance at Laurent, said, "In a moment!" and, crossing to the bed, bent over its occupant and slipped his hand under the bedclothes.

He was there a full minute; then he came away compressing his lips and frowning. "Now, Monsieur, I am at your service. It is your head, I see. Sit down, please. A cut? Anything else?"

Laurent did not sit down. "For God's sake, Monsieur le Docteur, tell me what is the meaning of that?" And he made a gesture towards the bed.

"Heart failure and collapse from excessive loss of blood is the meaning of that, Monsieur," replied the doctor rather curtly. "If you will kindly sit down and let me examine your head——"

"There's nothing there but a scratch," returned the young man, still uncomplying. "And that is not exactly what I meant. It's this dreadful story—they must all be lunatics in this place to think such a thing of *him*!"

The surgeon looked at him keenly. "You know who he is, then?"

"I do; but surely the Bonapartists do not—that is their only excuse. L'Oiseleur, the Vicomte de la Rocheterie, betray his own men! It's . . . it's grotesque!"

"You speak very confidently, Monsieur. But they do know quite well who he is, and I am afraid the story is only too true."

At that Monsieur de Courtomer, with almost a gesture of desperation, took the handkerchief off his head and sat down in the chair. "That is rank lunacy," he observed. "It was bad enough to come across him being brought here in this state—as I did yesterday—but to hear this slander in addition is like being in a nightmare. Even if I did not know him personally——"

The surgeon's hands, which were pushing the hair away from the scratch, stopped. "Ah, you know him personally," he said quickly. "You are a friend of his, then?"

Laurent's eyes turned towards the effigy in the bed. "I should be proud indeed if I could claim that distinction. An acquaintance would, I am afraid, be nearer the mark."

"And a champion," supplied the doctor.

"L'Oiseleur needs no champion," retorted the young man.

The hand fell somewhat weightily on his shoulder. "Indeed he does, Monsieur," returned its owner, and his voice was no longer sharp. "I assure you he stands in need of one rather badly just now. . . . And, for the moment, in need still more of something else."

Then he took his hand away, dropping all pretence of examining the hurt. His round face was very grave, and the fierceness had quite gone out of his little eyes. He looked at Laurent.

And Laurent stared back at him. "Something else," he repeated stupidly after an instant; and then, abruptly, "Tell me, is he going to live?"

"I don't know," answered M. Perrelet. The three words were eloquent. After a second or two he added, "He cannot hear; you need not be afraid," and went on, "I have only kept him alive so far by unremitting care and the constant use of stimulants. I have hardly left him for five minutes since he came. I shall sit up with him again to-night, but even if I succeed in pulling him through till to-morrow, I cannot go on doing that, for I'm an old man, with my work to do in the day . . ." He broke off and looked at Laurent again.

A certain dismayed realisation of whither this was tending came over M. de Courtomer. "But, good Heavens, I could not take your place! No one in the world knows less of medicine, less of nursing, than I do. I could not undertake the responsibility!"

"Then you are undertaking a heavier," responded the surgeon meaningly. "Without the most incessant care these next few days, that young man will just flicker out. It's a question whether he doesn't do it in any case."

"But surely you could get someone——"

"Yes, some stupid orderly into whose head I could perhaps drum something which he would do unwillingly and with contempt in his heart, because it is not only for an enemy—that he could stomach—but for a renegade. For this story, true or no, is known to every soul in the garrison." And, as Laurent gave an exclamation, he went on, "The result of such 'nursing' would inevitably be that he would slip through my fingers. And I cannot bring in a woman from the village; the Colonel would not hear of it, and indeed

it would not be much better. I'm no sentimentalist, Monsieur, but, guilty or innocent, what that unfortunate young man needs now as he never needed it, probably, in his life before, is just what Providence seems to have sent him—a friend! If it is a friend who still believes in him, so much the better. The only friend he does not want is one who, having seen his necessity, will pass him by on the other side."

How could he hesitate! He had wanted to meet L'Oiseleur, owed his capture very likely to the indulgence of that desire, and was needing to be urged to tend him now that he had thus tragically encountered him! Laurent put out his hand, his eyes smarting rather uncomfortably.

"I'll do it. I'll do anything you want. But I shall probably kill him," he added miserably.

He who claimed to be no sentimentalist patted him on the shoulder.

"No, you will not. And I shall be here myself until to-morrow. Now I will just wash that scratch of yours and put some more plaster on it, and then I will make them bring a bed for you in here." He worked quickly and deftly till Laurent's forehead was adorned with an impressive star. "There, that will do for the present. I must get something down his throat now—not very easy, but imperatively necessary every hour or so. You had better watch me."

And Laurent watched, nervously realising what he, so totally inexperienced, was about to undertake.

"He is unconscious, you say," he whispered, looking at the paper-white face on the surgeon's arm. "But he opened his eyes and looked at me a little before you came in."

M. Perrelet laid the inert head with its dulled and tangled locks very gently back on the pillow. "He is quite unconscious at this moment. From time to time he comes to the surface, as it were. If he is going to live he will do that oftener, until he stays there altogether." He slipped his hand under the bedclothes again. "Yes, the pulse, fast as it is, seems a trifle stronger. With your help, Monsieur, I have hopes . . . I have great hopes. There is evidently much natural vitality." And he left the bedside, adding briskly, "I will just run down and tell Colonel Guitton that you have volunteered your services."

"I should like to see the Colonel myself as soon as possible," observed Laurent. "I must disabuse his mind at once of this preposterous idea about M. de la Rocheterie."

"I am afraid that you will not find it very easy to do that,

Monsieur," said the doctor, shaking his head. "Facts stand in the way."

"*Facts!*" ejaculated Laurent with illimitable scorn.

"There was undoubtedly treachery at Pont-aux-Rochers. Colonel Richard, commanding at Saint-Goazec, had definite information sent him that L'Oiseleur's men would pass the bridge at a certain hour last Friday; he acted on the information, which purported to come from L'Oiseleur himself, ambushed the unprepared Chouans, and smashed them up."

"Well," said Laurent with a little grimace, "information *may* have been sent to this Colonel Richard, but that it should have been sent by La Rocheterie himself, by their own commander, by L'Oiseleur, who for more than a year before the Restoration kept the Imperialists at bay single-handed is, as I said before, grotesque!"

M. Perrelet shrugged his shoulders. "I assure you I should prefer to think so too. But, in that case, why did his men shoot him?"

"That idea is equally grotesque, Monsieur le Docteur. They would be incapable of such a thing. They did *not* shoot him, that's all.—What are his wounds, by the way? Very serious, I suppose?"

"No, not in themselves, except that he has a bullet lodged in his left shoulder which I rather dislike because I do not know how, in this state of exhaustion, he is ever going to stand the extraction. He has also had a ball through the right side, a little above the hipbone, which, by some miracle, has touched nothing vital. And there is a painful but superficial glancing wound across the chest.—But what did the mischief was the hæmorrhage; tied as he was in an upright position to that tree, and abandoned there for goodness knows how long . . . and he evidently struggled hard to get free . . . you can imagine——"

Laurent's face had slowly blanched as he stared at him. "It is really *true*—about that tree!"

"I do not see what object the contingent who found him could have in making up such a story. And when he was brought in he had a cut end of rope dangling from either wrist. I saw them with my own eyes—and the state of his wrists too!"

Laurent could feel now that he had turned pale. *Could* so unspeakable a thing have been the prelude to that forlorn journey in the cart!

"Yes, you see, Monsieur," said the doctor rather sadly, "it's pretty conclusive."

"Ah, not a bit!" retorted Laurent, recovering himself. "All it proves is that an attempt was made to murder him. To put the attempt down to his own men is the insanest of conjectures. He may have been captured by some band of marauders, or by Fédérés from the nearest town—or even by the Imperialists themselves . . . not these of Arbelles, but some other force. Yes, how can you disprove that it was the Imperialists?"

"Well, for one thing," replied M. Perrelet dryly, "because I imagine that regulars would have made a more thorough job of it. But I am quite open to conviction, for I don't mind telling you that—unsentimental old curmudgeon though I am—I took a sort of fancy to the unhappy young man from the moment I saw him yesterday. . . . And now I will go and see the Colonel. You are sure that you do not repent?"

"I am alarmed," replied Laurent with much truth, "but certainly I do not repent.—By the way," he added, as the doctor was at the door, "does M. de la Rocheterie himself know of the existence of this slander?"

M. Perrelet raised his eyebrows. "It all depends on what happened in the wood—the Bois des Fauvettes, I believe it is called. If his men shot him, it was presumably on account of the imputation that they did so; therefore he must know of it."

"Well, I am confident that *that* did not happen in the wood," proclaimed Laurent. "But has he learnt of the calumny since? Does he even know where he is?"

"Almost certainly not," replied the doctor. "He has never been sufficiently conscious. So he cannot have learnt of the charge since, and if he is really quite ignorant of it—well, there's no need to tell him yet awhile . . . if ever," he added under his breath. Then he turned the useless handle of the door. "Peste! I forgot I was locked in on *your* account!"

When Laurent was once more alone he ventured over to the bed again, and stood looking down at it in a tempest of pity and horror and indignation. *That* was L'Oiseleur . . . in need of a friend! And Fate had chosen him for the part. Fate had been bringing them together all the time! Ah, now he could repay that leap into the river—repay it doubly, perhaps, not only by caring for La Rocheterie's hurt body, but also for his honour, which seemed to have suffered so desperate and inexplicable a wound. . . .

Yet how could he, a prisoner, discover of what disastrous occurrence in the Bois des Fauvettes L'Oiseleur had been a victim, till L'Oiseleur himself could tell him? And perhaps those pale lips would never speak again. His own mouth twitched. "You shall live!" he said. "You *shall* . . . you will!"

(4)

That night always seemed to Laurent like a bad dream, in which, however, he was only a spectator, not an actor. There was nothing he could do, beyond attending to the fire; indeed, M. Perrelet told him that he might as well go to sleep. But, though he lay down on the bed which had been brought in for him and placed at the other side of the room, he scarcely closed his eyes.

About dawn, seeing the surgeon, who had never left his patient's side, get up rather quickly and bend over him, he slipped off his bed and tiptoed across the room. But after a moment M. Perrelet lifted his head from L'Oiseleur's heart, and Laurent, prepared for the worst, could see that he looked relieved.

"Distinctly stronger," he murmured. "We shall do it yet. Give me that saucepan off the fire. I want some more hot bouillon and brandy."

His own face looked tired and haggard in the growing light, but there was no fatigue in his manner. And after the brandy, his head still lying in the crook of the doctor's arm, L'Oiseleur sighed, shut his lips tight, and moved that head a little with a faint suggestion of restlessness.

"Go round and turn the pillow over," commanded M. Perrelet in a low voice.

Secretly terrified, Laurent obeyed. He was persuaded that La Rocheterie would open his eyes just at that moment. But the dark lashes were down now as if they meant to stay there for ever.

"That will do," said M. Perrelet. "Go back to bed and try to get a little sleep. You will be wanted in the day—for there will be a day for him now, I think."

About eight o'clock, indeed, M. Perrelet was so well satisfied with his patient's condition that he left the room for a little. To Laurent's surprise he returned with Colonel Guitton. The latter, taking no notice of Laurent, went

straight over to La Rocheterie's bed with the doctor, and stood there in silence.

"You said that he was better," he remarked after a moment. "He looks no better at all!" The disappointment in his tone almost amounted to annoyance.

"I told you it would be slow," replied M. Perrelet rather shortly.

The Colonel stooped. "I suppose he's not shamming by any chance?"

Laurent gave a movement. So did M. Perrelet.

"Shamming!" he exclaimed. "Do you think I am a . . . a greengrocer, Colonel? And I wish you would feel his pulse, and tell me how a man can simulate one like that!"

Colonel Guitton gave a sort of laugh. "You need not be so peppery, my dear Perrelet! I did not mean to cast any slur on your professional acumen. And, as to your patient, the charge of malingering would be a trifling one to bring against a man who has done what he has done.—Let me have a report of his progress, please, twice a day without fail," he finished curtly, and, turning on his heel, came in Laurent's direction.

"So you have elected to stay here, Monsieur le Comte, and play the Good Samaritan? Please remember that it is not my wish, and that when you change your mind you have only to ask to be moved."

Laurent had got the better of the strangling sensation which had afflicted him while the Bonapartist stood over Aymar de la Rocheterie (unhearing and unseeing though the latter was) and spoke of him like that. He was on fire, but coherently so, and having decided in the night exactly what he meant to say, he said it.

The Colonel heard him out. Then he shrugged his shoulders, remarked calmly, "Ah, a champion! Well, Monsieur de Courtomer, I am sorry for you!" and departed, M. Perrelet with him, leaving Laurent angry, dumbfounded and thoroughly bewildered, not by his incredulity but by his inconsistency. How, if he was so concerned for La Rocheterie's life, so anxious to hear of his progress, could he speak of him with such utter contempt? If he had such an opinion of him why did he trouble to have him kept alive at all? In M. Perrelet's case he could see that he really cared, and he was, besides, a doctor, but the Colonel . . .

Then M. Perrelet returned, looking rather grim, and Laurent was immediately called upon to assist at the dressing

of the patient's wounds—his first experience of the kind. Of this proceeding, indeed, L'Oiseleur himself betrayed little consciousness beyond moaning once or twice; but there was one matter of which Laurent, for his part, was even more acutely aware than of the injuries themselves. Each of M. de la Rocheterie's wrists, now seen for the first time, was encircled by a neat little bandage. After what the surgeon had said about ropes, it was not difficult to guess the reason for their presence, and it turned Laurent sick and cold. What ignominy had he suffered in that horrible wood, he, a gentleman and a hero?

The rest of the slow day was not free from anxiety, but as it wore on La Rocheterie's condition certainly improved, and he became conscious for increasingly longer intervals, till at last, by the end of the afternoon, he was lying most of the time with his eyes open, though he seemed quite unaware of Laurent's presence, possibly even of the doctor's. And when the night came which Laurent had been so dreading, he found that the responsibility for L'Oiseleur's life was not to rest entirely on his untried shoulders, since M. Perrelet was going to sleep in the château, not in his house in the village, and could be summoned at need by means of the sentry.

That was an immense relief. And Laurent did not have to summon him. The little flame of life, so anxiously tended, showed no flicker. La Rocheterie was very quiet, much as he had been during the day. Occasionally he would stir feebly or sigh; part of the time he seemed to be asleep. But even when his eyes were open they rested on his candle-lit surroundings, on the screen which had now been placed at the side of the bed, or on the watcher, with the same absence of interest, and he took what was given him with a similar indifference.

Perhaps, drained of blood as he was, he had lost for the time his hold on realities. And possibly, in the circumstances, this was as well. But the human body seemed to the newly initiated student a terrifyingly frail machine. What would Maman say if she could see M. de la Rocheterie now . . . if she could have seen both of them, brought together like this! Darling Maman! . . . and Laurent pondered at intervals, during that long night, whether his gaolers would let him send a letter to tell her that he was at least safe. Too safe, he would have said, but for that helpless and calumniated head on the pillow there!

(5)

At the conclusion of his vigil in the morning Laurent, heavy-eyed but relieved, was rewarded with praise. A little later another milestone was passed: Aymar de la Rocheterie spoke for the first time.

Laurent had already pricked up his ears when he heard M. Perrelet, on the inner side of the screen, saying to him encouragingly, "Ah, now I am beginning to be pleased with you!"

And to this a voice—more a breath than a voice, and broken at that—said, slowly and with effort:

"You are the doctor, Monsieur? . . . Where am I?"

"In the château of Arbelles," responded M. Perrelet, "where we are going to make you quite well again."

"How long . . ."

"Since Monday evening. This is Thursday morning."

"Arbelles," murmured the voice. There was a pause; then it said, "But that Royalist officer . . . here sometimes . . . ?"

"He is a prisoner like you, Monsieur," responded M. Perrelet. There was a moment's silence, and then the wounded man said:

"And it was the . . . Bonapartists then who . . . brought me here?"

To some sudden strand of anguish in the voice M. Perrelet replied soothingly, "Well, it does not much matter who brought you. Yes, they found you unconscious. Now you had better not talk any more. I am going to do your dressings."

He was obeyed. Indeed it was obviously as much as La Rocheterie could do to retain his hold on consciousness at all during the next half-hour. But he made no shadow of protest or complaint, and when at last the business was over, he lay motionless again, with his eyes shut, just a little more nearly the hue of the sheets than before.

He seemed in fact to be in a drowse when M. Perrelet came back to the bedside with a towel and the bandage scissors in his hand. "I meant to have cut off this long hair before," he remarked to Laurent, still on the farther side of the bed. "He will be much more comfortable with it gone. Curious colour!" He touched a bronze ripple.

"You are going to cut it off!" exclaimed Laurent in a low tone. The intention seemed almost sacrilege.

The surgeon nodded. "At least, you shall do it, while I hold his head up."

"Oh, but . . ." said Laurent, hesitatingly accepting the scissors, "perhaps he would not wish it. . . . Unless of course it is necessary. . . ."

"I don't know that it is necessary," returned M. Perrelet, "but——"

Here, immensely to the surprise of both of them, he over whose body they were holding this debate opened his eyes and faintly said something. The old doctor bent down to catch it, but Laurent, whose hearing was sharper, had no need to stoop. L'Oiseleur had whispered, "Cut it off. . . . I shall not want it so . . . any more. . . ."

After that there was nothing to say. But Laurent had his teeth in his underlip as he played the executioner, nervously clipping away at the 'tiresome stuff,' as its owner had once so insouciantly called it, till the shoulder-long locks, curling a little at the ends, lay like autumn beech-leaves on the linen.

*"Nous n'irons plus aux bois,
Les lauriers sont coupés,"*

—that most haunting couplet came into his head meanwhile, to stay there all the rest of the morning.

"That will be much better, thank you, Monsieur de Courtomer," said M. Perrelet, settling the shorn head back again.

Was it only Laurent's fancy that a slight change passed over Aymar de la Rocheterie's half-conscious face at the name?

And, waking that afternoon from a short doze himself, Laurent found his charge's conscious gaze fixed full on him. As Laurent's glance met his the very faintest tinge of colour mounted to his face—he was too bloodless to show more. But he looked away, saying nothing.

Laurent felt certain, however, that he had recognised him. In his present great prostration this was probably a shock; he must give him time to get over it. He would obviously have to wait a little for the story of the doings in the wood; La Rocheterie would not have the strength to tell him yet.

Nor, perhaps, the inclination, it occurred to him later, when, having asked the wounded man whether there was anything he could do to make him more comfortable, he replied in the negative in a voice that seemed to the enquirer,

for all its weakness, to be so extremely glacial that he felt a chill at the heart. Had La Rocheterie not recognised him after all? Should he recall himself to his memory? Better not: M. Perrelet would probably disapprove.

But during the night he was faced with a new idea. Was it possible that L'Oiseleur, even though he had recognised him (for the more Laurent thought about that the more he felt sure that he had), did not want to admit the fact. And if so, in Heaven's name why not? Was it possible that, after all, he *did* know something of the terrible imputation under which he lay? But even then—— Laurent was at a loss, and no amount of studying his face, at moments during the vigil when La Rocheterie was asleep, helped him to a solution. All he gained was a completer impression of the extraordinary effect of candour, innocence and helplessness given to it in repose by the motionless lashes, as long and curving as those of a boy.

Another morning brought a repetition of the morning before. M. Perrelet seemed pleased, and, presumably of set purpose, he talked a little as he did the dressings. But his patient did not respond to his encouragement, and Laurent could not disguise from himself that he himself was beginning to be a trifle . . . yes, disappointed in him. La Rocheterie was very likely in pain from the wound in his chest with every breath he drew, and, worse, was so drained of vitality that he could not move or lift a hand to help himself, but somehow one would have thought that, by this time, a man of his fibre would have rallied a little in spirit, if not in body. On the contrary, in these last two days Laurent had once or twice surprised on his increasingly haggard face such an expression of utter hopelessness as to be shocked by it. Yet it was puzzling how, despite his silence and inertia, La Rocheterie would now and then turn on M. Perrelet a gaze that seemed pregnant with some unspoken question.

Possibly the doctor himself had noticed this, or it was for some other reason that he gave Laurent a warning before he left.

"In spite of the improvement, he must be kept absolutely quiet," he said. "Whatever you do, don't go talking to him about Pont-aux-Rochers or the wood. I would not answer for the consequences if he is agitated in any way."

"To talk is the last thing he seems to want to do," observed his nurse.

"I am not so sure of that," returned M. Perrelet.

(6)

There seemed to be a great deal of movement going on at Arbelles that afternoon, and Laurent, sitting sleepily by the open window, remembered how M. Perrelet had said that a considerable part of the troops there had been ordered off against the small Royalist bodies in the Plesguen district who, under the leadership of a certain M. du Tremblay, were understood to be meditating a coup, but in what direction was uncertain. Colonel Guitton was going in command of the force from the château, a piece of news which delighted M. de Courtomer. The name of du Tremblay seemed familiar to him, but he was too lazy, or too tired, to recover the connection.

La Rocheterie was asleep. Though the screen hid his body from Laurent, it had not been drawn completely up to the head of the bed, and through the gap the young man could see his face turned sideways on the pillow, still and colourless as alabaster, and all the more colourless for the lock of ruddy hair lying on the brow. He was tranquil enough now. But when he was awake . . . Oh, that cursèd, cursèd wood!

Quick spurred steps were audible at this juncture outside, and in a moment more, to Laurent's surprise, and by no means to his pleasure, there entered Colonel Guitton, with the Major. The former was evidently ready for the field, booted, sword-girt and polished, his tall brass helmet with the horse-hair plume and the strip of leopard-skin giving him additional height and truculence. Into the yellow plastron of his uniform was stuck a folded paper. He took no notice of Laurent beyond returning his salute, and, followed by the other officer, clanked across the room to L'Oiseleur's bed and disappeared behind the screen.

This irruption had of course roused the sleeper, for Laurent saw him stir and open his eyes.

"Ah, I am glad to see—as well as to hear—that you are better, Monsieur," came Colonel Guitton's voice, quick and incisive, "because I want a little conversation with you."

Laurent promptly walked to the farther edge of the screen. "If you will excuse me, sir, M. Perrelet left particular orders that M. de la Rocheterie was to be kept absolutely quiet."

The helmeted head turned. "I can't help that," said its owner, none too agreeably. "This business is far too urgent to wait on M. Perrelet's permission. Moreover, we shall not keep M. de la Rocheterie long."

He drew the chair by the bed still nearer and sat down, the Major standing behind him, while Laurent, after a second or two's hesitation, returned to his former place by the window. He was perturbed, but he felt that if Colonel Guitton had the sense of a fly he would see that L'Oiseleur was in no fit state for conversation.

"I want to ask you a question or two," he heard the Colonel reiterate, in a much lower voice—but one which, whether he knew it or no, was perfectly audible. "To go straight to the point, the district of St. Pierre de Plesguen is moving." He waited a moment, and then added, "I expect I am right in concluding that M. du Tremblay's real plans are known to you?"

L'Oiseleur also waited a moment before replying. "If it interests you . . . they are." His voice was slow and weak, but the reply had all the effect of curtness.

"It does interest me, Monsieur de la Rocheterie," said the dragoon. "I am going out now in the hope of countering those plans . . . when I know a little more definitely what they are."

And there was another pause, which Laurent dimly felt to be charged with something uncomfortable and threatening, though he could not as yet divine the goal of this conversation. But it had suddenly come to him where he had heard the name of du Tremblay before, where he had seen the man who bore it—that officer at the Duc de Saint-Séverin's reception who knew so much about La Rocheterie and had spoken of him so warmly. They had probably concerted measures. . . .

"Do you expect me to wish you success?" asked the faint voice at last.

"No, I expect something a little more concrete than good wishes," retorted Colonel Guitton. He gave a half-laugh and lowered his voice still more, but not sufficiently. "Come, La Rocheterie, let us get this business over as quickly as possible. I am sure that you understand me!"

The faint, fugitive colour dyed L'Oiseleur's pallor to the roots of his hair. "God! For what do you take me?"

"Well," sniggered the Imperialist, "I had really no intention of pronouncing the word to your face, but if you want it . . . No, I take you for a man who, like M. de Labédoyère, has seen the error of his ways, a man who is aware, now that the Emperor is back, how things are likely to go, and has acted accordingly . . . and wisely, in my view. Only you cannot stop half-way, you know. So——"

Little shoots of incredulity and horror had been running up and down the witness as he stood there rigid by the window, unseen and perhaps already forgotten. Was it conceivable that they were expecting L'Oiseleur, *L'Oiseleur*, to reveal the plans which he and du Tremblay had no doubt made together, now that du Tremblay was on the verge of carrying them out? It was so infamous that it could not be true; he must be wronging the two officers. He restrained himself and listened. As for L'Oiseleur himself, pinned there under their gaze, he had turned his head away, his teeth set in his lip.

"Come, La Rocheterie, don't prolong this!" went on the Imperialist, and his tone held a certain repellent bonhomie. "I am in a great hurry, and you are ill. And, hang it all, you made Colonel Richard a present of your own plans; all I'm asking for is a little light on du Tremblay's!"

Yes, they did expect it! And it was repeated to his very face, that vile and terrible lie! Laurent took an instinctive step forward—and then checked himself. La Rocheterie had turned his head back again on the pillow; he was going at least to have the satisfaction of denying the charge. But was it any wonder that he looked ghastly?

"You can . . . insult me . . ." he got out, struggling a little for breath, "but you can never . . . make me do that!"

"*Make* you, you fool!" snarled Colonel Guitton, all the false geniality gone, "—there's no question of 'making,' if you have any regard for your own skin! Don't you realise that you stand to find a Royalist triumph a cursed bad look out for yourself after what you've done, if they get hold of you!"

L'Oiseleur's lip curled. "I had rather their justice . . . than your mercy."

The charge was beneath his contempt then; he had not even troubled to deny it. But how long was this to go on? Was it of any use making another appeal to them? No; a fellow-captive had no power to stop them, and if he intervened again, La Rocheterie would inevitably realise his presence, and he was beginning most devoutly to hope that he had forgotten it.

The Colonel cleared his throat. From his now quite unmodulated voice it was plain that he, at all events, had forgotten him. "Now, look here, La Rocheterie, you are behaving insanely. I can't think what has come to you!

Your own side knows, or will soon know, what you have done, while on the other hand ours is already in your debt—though I don't doubt you got your *quid pro quo* from Richard. Now here is a still greater opportunity of putting us—I might almost say the Emperor—under an obligation to you, and yet, after having so thoroughly burned your boats, you hesitate to take it!"

"*Hesitate!*"

The Colonel swore softly. Then he smote himself on the leg. "Parbleu, I am stupid! I . . . I apologise, La Rocheterie. But you were unlucky, and you need have no fear of consequences this time, for, most fortunately, I have a document here which will make the business quite safe for you. I brought it to ask you about it." Something rustled. "I assume that this paper which was found on you contains notes or what not of du Tremblay's plans, since it is headed with his name. So if ever you were accused of having communicated them you could safely say—and I would support you—that the cipher notes were taken from you and read." His voice was eager, explanatory, almost coaxing. "Do you see? It is quite safe. I perfectly understand that in the event of recapture you do not want to face a firing-party for the second time. But no one could possibly prove that we did not contrive to decipher these notes for ourselves."

A sound resembling a laugh came from the bed. "Try then!" said its occupant.

"Aubert!" said the Colonel, and he and the Major whispered together. Nevertheless Laurent overheard the words "extraordinary obstinacy . . . never anticipated . . . cannot understand. . . ." It seemed clear now—only too clear—why they had been so anxious to keep L'Oiseleur alive. . . . And meanwhile he lay, not looking at them, his mouth set hard, and breathing rather fast, the disastrous effect of this insulting interrogatory quite plain. And when Laurent saw the sweat on his brow he hoped with a desperate hope that, as his inquisitors were in a hurry and could, surely, see that they would elicit nothing, they would desist. . . . But then, to his dismay, he heard the murmured words, "going to have it out of him at whatever cost!"

And Colonel Guitton's chair scraped along the floor as he drew it nearer. Laurent could now see part of his green sleeve and his strong, blunt-fingered hand, in which was a piece of stained and crumpled paper.

"Now, La Rocheterie," he said, in quite a different tone, "you'll answer my questions, please! It's no good shamming faintness. You can have brandy if you need it. Are these——"—he tapped the paper—"your notes or du Tremblay's?"

From his low pillow L'Oiseleur looked up at his interrogator steadily. Laurent felt sure that the taunt about shamming had stung him, and that he was going, to his own cost, to show that it was not that he could not speak, but that he would not. He now said quietly, "They are my own."

"Good! It is your private cipher then?"

"Yes."

"And the notes are concerned with this plan of du Tremblay's?"

"I shall not answer that."

"That shows they are. You have answered. Now I suppose you will pretend that you cannot read your cipher without the key?"

"I can read it perfectly," said the weak, disdainful voice.

"The deuce you can! Well, that's honest, at all events. As I hold the paper in front of you, you could read it off, then?"

"If I pleased."

"As a matter of fact," observed the Colonel over his shoulder to the Major, "he probably knows by heart what is there—there is not very much." He turned once more to his prisoner. "Now I daresay you think that is what I am going to ask you to do, eh?—and that is why you are so ready to admit that you can read it. Well, you are wrong. I am not quite such a fool. What you are going to do, Monsieur L'Oiseleur, is to give us the *key* of your cipher, and then, deciphering these notes ourselves, we can be sure that we are not being tricked! Otherwise I might just as well have asked you straight out for verbal information, which I see now I could not rely on when I had it . . . though God knows what game you are playing! You follow me?"

"Perfectly." But the sweat was running down his forehead.

"Well now! You are not strong enough to write, I fancy. The Major will take it down for you. Is it a complicated cipher?"

There was a pause which seemed to Laurent endless. He stood there biting his clenched hands, only keeping himself in with the greatest difficulty. Surely, surely they could see

what they were doing, and would refrain! The pulsations of La Rocheterie's enfeebled and overdriven heart seemed to be shaking him as he lay there with his eyes half closed, and the silence was filled with the sound of his rapid, sobbing breathing. But at last he said, with a supreme effort to speak clearly,

"Do you really imagine . . . I am going . . . to give it to you?"

"I know you are," retorted Guitton coolly, "because I am going to sit beside you and ask you for it till you do!"

"Then you are likely . . . to stay here till . . ." But, game as he was, he could not finish the sentence. He made instead a slight convulsive movement.

"Give me the pencil and paper, Aubert," said the Colonel, undisturbed. "Now, La Rocheterie, we have had enough of this heroic pose. The Moulin Brûlé is very much past history. The sooner you give in the better for yourself. Do you think I am going to move against du Tremblay ignorant of his plans when you, with your penchant for passing on information, are aware of them? I don't enjoy sacrificing my men! . . . This is mainly a number cipher, I see; but I fancy one or two of the words are really cipher too, eh?"

"I shall not . . ."

"Oh yes, you will. Suppose you begin by telling me what this number which occurs so frequently represents. You see the one I mean. Don't shut your eyes like that! Two hundred and eighteen—what does two hundred and eighteen represent?"

There was no answer. The face on the pillow was no longer alabaster; it was ashen.

"What does two hundred and eighteen represent, La Rocheterie? I have plenty of time yet; you'll have to tell me in the end. Is it 'river'—'Aven'?"

L'Oiseleur suddenly moved his head as if he could not bear much more, and said sharply to himself, "O God!"

"Ah," commented Guitton in a tone of satisfaction. "You see! in a few minutes you will find yourself telling me all I want to know, and then I will go away and leave you in peace. Perhaps indeed you are already prepared to . . . No? Very well, we will return to our friend two hundred and eighteen. Once more, what does two hundred and eighteen stand for?"

His victim looked up at him desperately and defiantly and shook his head. It made no difference; the query was

merely repeated: "What does two hundred and eighteen stand for?"

L'Oiseleur made a last effort to speak, but no sound was audible. His eyes closed. Something in his appearance caused Colonel Guitton to jump up with an exclamation. "Look here then, I will be contented with just this—Does du Tremblay intend to cross the Aven or no? But, mind you, the truth, or it will be the worse for you! Now, yes or no? Do you hear me? . . . *Do* you hear me? . . . What's that?"

"I think he means, sir," said the Major, who had slipped up the other side of the bed, and was also bending over its occupant, "that he hears you, but that he will not tell you. I'm afraid it's no use; he's collapsing."

"I was afraid so, damn him!" said Colonel Guitton with passionate disgust. "Find some brandy, then, Aubert. There must be some way to get it out of him!"

But Laurent, like Aymar de la Rocheterie, had had more than he could stand. Only those two considerations, his knowledge of his own helplessness, and regard for L'Oiseleur's feelings, had kept him in leash so long. Now it was not a question of L'Oiseleur's feelings but of his very life—for Laurent had just had a full view of him as the Colonel shifted his position. He snatched up the brandy, and sprang to the other entrance of the screen just as Major Aubert came round it.

"Stop, stop, for God's sake!" he cried, seizing him by the arm. "You are murdering him—can't you see it!—and he'll never tell! Here's the brandy, but for pity's sake don't go on . . . it's quite useless!"

"What's this?" cut in Colonel Guitton's voice through the screen—or rather, over it, for, turning suddenly and catching the end, he toppled the whole structure over with a crash. "Is the other still there?—Damnation, I had forgotten!"

"So I should imagine," retorted Laurent, facing him over the fallen screen. "I can very well fancy that you did forget you had a witness of your detestable proceedings! Let me go to him!" And he frantically tried to push past the Colonel, but that officer as furiously pushed him back.

"Major Aubert, put this young meddler outside the door in charge of the sentry! I was a damned fool ever to let him stay in the room. Of course La Rocheterie won't speak while he is here! Out with him!"

"I refuse!" began Laurent—and then saw that he had better go. If he objected it would only lead to his being dragged out, and prolonging this dreadful scene. Besides, La Rocheterie, lying there like death itself, without any struggle for breath now, without the flicker of an eyelid—La Rocheterie was palpably beyond hearing any more insults or questions.

"You have killed him, you devil!" he cried with a passionate gesture. But the executioner was more than deaf. Even as Laurent was pushed to the door by the Major he heard the angry voice saying, "Perhaps the initial mistake I made was in not offering this fellow here a price first. How much, I wonder, did he get from——"

Then the door slammed and was locked behind him, and he found himself, seething with fury, in the corridor with the bewildered sentry.

His first impulse, now that he was out, was to batter on the door to be let in again; it was horrible to have to leave L'Oiseleur in the grip of those vultures. But they could not do any more now. The question was, had they finished him already? Tears of helpless rage were dimming his eyes when suddenly, some way down the corridor, he saw a rotund form making for the staircase—M. Perrelet. But he was not coming this way; he had paid his afternoon visit . . . they knew that, probably. He *should* come, though . . . Despite his somewhat sturdy build, Laurent was very quick and light on his feet, and was down the passage like a flash, the sentry when he had grasped his intention, pounding after him.

"Hallo!" said M. Perrelet, turning round. "Here, young man, if you are escaping, I——"

Laurent seized him by the arm. "For Heaven's sake, come! They are killing him in there, the Colonel and——" Further revelations were cut short by the sentry's throwing himself on their maker from behind and putting an arm round his neck.

"It's all right," gasped Laurent. "I'm not escaping. Hurry, Monsieur Perrelet—they've been questioning him till . . . I don't know if he's breathing now!"

M. Perrelet let fly as full-blooded an oath as any soldier and trotted down the corridor. "Come on!" said Laurent to the sentry, who still held him. And the cortège arrived just as the door opened once more and the two officers came out. The Colonel was in a towering rage.

"Ah, Doctor, you'd better go in to your patient. He

needs you, I fancy—not that it matters now. By the time I got this young meddler out it was too late. . . . And to have the very notes in my hand!” He crumpled the sheet of cipher into a ball, threw it violently down, and strode off down the corridor followed by the Major. M. Perrelet had already shot in through the open door.

And in a moment or two Laurent, with a failing heart for what he should find, said to the now dazed sentry, “I suppose I had better go back,” and went.

“Is that you?” called out M. Perrelet. “Put the kettle on the fire, quick!—and come and rub his hands and feet!”

He had L’Oiseleur, quite inanimate, in his arms; the bandages were already severed, and he was rubbing him over the region of the heart with brandy.

“He’s gone!” exclaimed Laurent, terrified, when he saw the fixed, half-open eyes and the head fallen aside.

“Not quite,” replied M. Perrelet grimly. “—But you must work harder than that!”

(7)

It was nearly two o’clock in the morning—but not of the next morning, the morning after that. Laurent rose from replenishing the little fire which was always burning. In a few moments M. Perrelet would relieve him and he could sleep.

Thanks to the old surgeon, L’Oiseleur had been saved—for the second time—but it had been touch and go for some hours. Before nightfall on Friday they had succeeded in pulling him back to a kind of consciousness, and all yesterday he had lain quiescent, so exhausted that it had been difficult to rouse him to take nourishment, but at least in outward peace, as Laurent kept assuring himself, for the brutality which had been practised on La Rocheterie in this room haunted him, waking or sleeping. M. Perrelet indeed was amazed at the rally, considering that the victim’s heart was, and would long remain, so much impaired.

Laurent stood now for a moment at the foot of the bed—and had a sudden feeling that he should like to hang a laurel wreath there. Then M. Perrelet entered in a dressing-gown, and waved him to his own couch.

He woke about five o’clock to find, to his surprise, a low-voiced conversation going on behind the screen. Since his collapse La Rocheterie had not uttered a word.

“. . . kept me alive for *that!*” he caught the end of a

sentence, in his broken, trailing voice, suffused nevertheless with bitterness.

"Now, my boy," he heard M. Perrelet reply gently, "you cannot honestly think that was my purpose, can you? If I could have Colonel Guitton tried for attempted murder, I would willingly do so. But you must not think of it any more; it is over now."

The voice said, "Till they try again!"

"No, no!" The old surgeon sounded genuinely shocked. "The Colonel has left Arbelles. It shall never happen again, I swear it. And you did not tell him anything; you know that, don't you?"

"Yes . . . but . . . he *asked* me . . . he *dared* to ask me!" gasped L'Oiseleur ". . . and before M. de Courtomer!"

(Yes, he had recognised him—he had realised that he was there!)

"Come, come, my child, you *must* be quiet!" said the doctor. "I know that you went through a dreadful time, but you kept your mouth shut—that's really all you care about, isn't it? Now see if you cannot get to sleep again—to please me!"

And to Laurent's relief there was silence for a little; then the ghost of a voice began again. The question itself was inaudible.

"M. de Courtomer is here," answered M. Perrelet. "He is asleep just now. He helps me to look after you, you know."

"He is here—in the room? Always?"

"Certainly. You cannot be left."

"But, my God," came desperately from the bed, "that is the one thing I want . . . to be left alone. And instead of that he . . . who knew me once . . . was in the room . . . and heard . . . *everything*! Can't he be put somewhere else . . . can't I be alone?" The voice was almost sobbing in its entreaty.

Poor Laurent, in his bed, covered his face with his hands. So much for his dreams of a grateful recognition! Yes, that was it, as he had felt at the time—the intolerable humiliation, to a very proud and sensitive spirit, of having had an acquaintance a witness of Friday's proceedings.

There was a movement behind the screen. "Chut! mon enfant!" said the doctor. "You must not agitate yourself like this! M. de Courtomer is here of his own free

will to nurse you, and he is so much your champion that he has twice already fought your battle with the Colonel. And if he had not fetched me in after that business on Friday——”

“I wish he had not!” broke in the faint, bitter voice. “You are kind, Doctor . . . but if you would only let me die . . .”

This was becoming unbearable. Never had Laurent conceived of the La Rocheterie he had known before, though he was young enough, than as a man—even, by reason of his quiet self-possession and his prestige, than as a man older, perhaps, than he really was. He sounded now like a broken-hearted boy. The listener put his hands over his ears.

He kept them there till he was sure that the voices had ceased. A little afterwards he heard M. Perrelet emerge very cautiously and tiptoe over to his bed. The young man’s instant pretence of being asleep did not deceive the doctor. He bent over him till his mouth was almost at his ear and whispered, “Did you by any chance hear what was said just now?”

“Yes,” breathed Laurent with his eyes shut.

“You won’t take any notice of it, my dear boy, will you?” pleaded the surgeon in the same almost inaudible tone. “He’s nearly crazy after that damnable strain.”

“That’s obvious. And therefore—after what he said—I had better be moved elsewhere.”

“No, no, I can’t spare you. He will get over this morbid feeling about you as the effects of that scene wear off.”

“But shall I get over his having had it?” thought Laurent. He said nothing, but suddenly buried his face in the pillow.

“You will stay—and take no notice?” queried the voice in his ear; and after a moment Laurent gave a smothered assent.

The grasp on his shoulder tightened. “Good boy!” whispered M. Perrelet, and went away.

But it was not easy to carry out that promise. Already, by the time that the hour for dressings arrived, L’Oiseleur had contrived, without the aid of speech, to make his feelings about the unwilling witness so clear that Laurent was constrained to help himself through that ordeal by pretending that the set and frozen face below him belonged to someone whom he had never seen before. And indeed it could not have shown less sign of recognition had this really been the case.

At the conclusion M. Perrelet suddenly laid hold of his patient's arm.

"Time I had a look at these wrists again," he murmured and began to unfasten the little bandage.

The wrist jerked weakly in his hold. "No!" ejaculated the Vicomte de la Rocheterie with a catch of the breath. "Leave them alone, please!"

Low as it was, the tone was a command, which the frown emphasised. M. Perrelet just glanced at the speaker. "My dear boy," he said, almost equally low, "it is necessary," and went on unwinding. But Laurent, averting his face, slipped away from the bed, lest he should see the marks of those accursed ropes, and L'Oiseleur have him again as an unwilling witness of his humiliation.

He was not so to avoid it. "Will you please bring that fresh lint I left on the table," came the surgeon's voice a moment later. For an instant Laurent had the idea of saying that he could not find it—the next he snatched it angrily up and went round the barrier. La Rocheterie's head was turned stiffly away, but Laurent had the impression that he was grinding his teeth. And on the unbandaged wrist in M. Perrelet's hold he saw just what he had guessed and feared. . . . Yes, he must have struggled indeed! Perhaps, still worse, he had been dragged about. . . . Laurent silently put the lint on the bed and went away again.

And there was more than one moment during that day—it was the Sunday—when, despite his promise to M. Perrelet, Laurent found himself saying, "I'll be hanged if I stay here!" For L'Oiseleur's demeanour towards him continued to be of a politeness so stony that his guardian would really much have preferred him to be rude. After that one approach to a breakdown to which, in his precarious state, insults and torture had brought him, La Rocheterie had evidently summoned up all his pride and his endurance. There was nothing of that heart-rending boyishness about him now; he was a man again, and a desperately unapproachable one. It was extraordinary that a person who was so utterly helpless and dependent on another could contrive to keep that other so freezingly at arm's length. Yet, directly Laurent had come to the conclusion that next time M. Perrelet entered he must ask to be moved elsewhere, he had only to look at his charge lying there to feel that he could not bring himself to desert him. However much La Rocheterie might not want him, he needed him terribly.

And always at the back of Laurent's mind was the instinctive knowledge that, before he was brought to Arbelles, he must have been through some terrible experience to be so completely changed. The very attractive, courteous, self-contained young man of last year, with his modesty, his easy and quiet gaiety, his consideration for others, was entirely gone, and in his place was a phantom of that figure, sombre and tortured, too sore in spirit to accept the most willing sympathy and service. His very voice was changed. No; it was plain to Laurent that the slander was at the back of all that had happened to him even before he came to the château. And what exactly had happened? Every day, every hour, the situation seemed to blossom into fresh horrible possibilities; and before that agonised silence one was helpless. For that he would hear now from the victim's own lips the story of what he had undergone seemed so improbable that Laurent had given up considering it. The best he could hope for was that he could continue to nurse him without being asked point-blank to leave him. And though he would abstain from that request now, directly L'Oiseleur was well enough to be left he *should* ask to be moved—*instantly*.

It was a small but very wounding occurrence which fixed him in this resolve. He noticed during the afternoon that a lock of the hair which he had cut so badly, straggling over his forehead, was bothering the helpless man. Laurent could not think at first why he was feebly moving his head first to one side, then to the other, but when L'Oiseleur began slowly to try to disengage a hand from beneath the bedclothes to deal with the annoyance Laurent jumped up, murmuring "Let me do that for you!" But as he gently put aside the recalcitrant lock he felt La Rocheterie shrink—most indubitably shrink—from his touch, flashing up at him as he did so an extraordinary glance of hostility—it could be nothing else. And Laurent had gone instantly away without a word.

He went to bed that night feeling almost desperate. His patient had intimated in the most icy tones that he did not wish for anything during the night, and that he would be extremely obliged if the light might not be kept burning as hitherto. Laurent knew that he was doing very wrong in acceding to these requests (which partook more of the nature of commands), but he simply had not the courage to contravene them.

(8)

At the end of his visit next morning M. Perrelet managed to whisper to Laurent, under cover of washing his hands, "Is he being very difficult?"

"A little," answered M. de Courtomer, colouring.

"I thought so! But you know, in some way or other, he's going through hell, that young man! I should know that as a doctor, if I had not heard that dark story about him. So hold on, there's a good lad, and one day he will realise what you are doing for him and thank you for it."

'Going through hell.' The phrase recurred to Laurent as he sat by the window that afternoon. Yes, he looked as if he were. And the strain, whatever it was, was not lessening but increasing. All the hours, reflected Laurent, that he lies there motionless, he is thinking, thinking . . . and of what? Why will he not tell me—tell me at least something . . . tell me that he is in a great strait? For whatever he is going through cannot be caused by his own misdoing; yet in this horrible tale there is misdoing—someone else's, of which the blame has fallen on him.

Then it came to him like a flash of lightning. *No, he has taken it on himself!*

An immense cloud whose existence he had hardly acknowledged rolled away from Laurent's mind. Of course that was it! How could he have been so dense? That would fully account for La Rocheterie's not having denied the imputation when the Colonel made it so brutally to his face. Some other man had committed the traitorous act which had brought about Pont-aux-Rochers, and L'Oiseleur, for some reason, had shouldered the blame. He was enduring all this vicarious shame for someone else . . . and suffering bitterly under it.

His mind full of this illumination, Laurent looked thoughtfully across the room at the rococo clock on the mantelpiece, for at three o'clock he was to take La Rocheterie's pulse, a task entrusted to him in M. Perrelet's absence. As the time-piece had marked half-past two when last he looked at it it must have stopped. He went over to it to make sure, and thus came into full view of the bed, and was aware that its occupant was awake, and watching him as he put his ear to the glass. It was unlikely that he would address him, for he hardly ever spoke. Nothing could have surprised him more than to hear what he did.

"The clock stopped quite half an hour ago, Monsieur de Courtomer.—It is Monsieur de Courtomer, is it not?"

Laurent turned round, hoping that he was not showing his amazement, aware as he was that the real recognition had been made four days ago.

"Yes, Monsieur, I was taken prisoner a week since."

"And wounded too, I see," observed M. de la Rocheterie gravely.

"Wounded?" queried Laurent, quite forgetting the plaster on his forehead.

"Your head."

"Oh, that!" exclaimed the young man, putting up a hand to his adornment. "That is nothing—a scratch from a hedge."

"But a scratch honourably come by."

Laurent winced at the tone, and hurriedly said, "If you will permit me, Monsieur de la Rocheterie," he could bring out the name now, "I will take your pulse—M. Perrelet's orders."

A tiny frown appeared between the slender eyebrows, and Laurent felt instantly that he did not want one of his bandaged wrists exposed to the light of day—for both his hands were under the bedclothes. "Do not move your arm, pray," he remarked quickly. "I can get at your pulse quite well as you are." And, watch in hand, he knelt down by the bed and slipped his hand in at the side. His fingers nevertheless fumbled about the wrappings as they sought for the artery.

"It will be more convenient for you when those bandages are off," observed the chilling voice.

Laurent was saved any reply to this remark by the fact that, his eyes glued to his watch, he was counting, as he had recently been instructed. Then he got up and went to the table to write down the result of his computations.

"You saw yesterday why I have to have my wrists bandaged?" said L'Oiseleur abruptly.

Laurent had his back to him. "I did not look particularly," he very truthfully replied.

"Then I advise you to do so, next time," said Aymar de la Rocheterie. "You may not, then, perhaps, care to . . . continue your ministrations."

Laurent was momentarily tempted to retort, "Would that please you?" but he was too much afraid of the answer to risk it. Oh, why would he, with the scrap of strength he had gained, use it in torturing himself and his fellow-captive?

Inspired by sheer desperation the guardian turned round with an air of authority and said, "Monsieur de la Rocheterie, I am under strict orders not to let you talk. If you will allow me, I will try to arrange you more comfortably, and perhaps you could sleep a little."

The bloodless lips almost twitched into a smile as the wounded man looked up at him. "When last we met, Monsieur de Courtomer, under very different circumstances——"

"Excuse me, but would you not like your pillow turned?"

"No, thank you. As I was saying——"

"If only you would not talk!" interjected Laurent.

"When last I had the pleasure of seeing you . . . at M. de Saint-Séverin's reception . . . I little guessed that at our next meeting you would be what you are . . . and I——" he drew a long breath "—and I . . . what I am!"

"—Surgeon's assistant and patient," struck in Laurent gallantly. "No, I little thought that myself!"

"It was not purely in that rôle . . . that I was considering myself," commented L'Oiseleur. He did smile this time, a rather terrible smile. And then, spent by his unwonted effort at conversation—and such a conversation, thought the unhappy Laurent—he shut his eyes, and relapsed once more into complete silence and immobility.

M. Perrelet was not pleased with his patient that evening. He explained to Laurent that what he had rather anticipated was happening—the bullet in his shoulder was poisoning him. He thought that M. de la Rocheterie could stand the extraction now; indeed there was no choice in the matter. He would perform it next day; his victim need not know of his intention till the morning.

Poor Laurent wished that the same reticence had been exercised with regard to himself; he fancied that he needed it far more. He spent an apprehensive and L'Oiseleur a restless night.

(9)

"Well, I am glad that is satisfactorily over," remarked M. Perrelet next morning as he washed his instruments at the table in the middle of the room. "All the same, as I told you, I have put him to sleep because that shoulder will hurt for some time like the devil, and I am very anxious to avoid

unnecessary heroism—it's bad for his heart. We have had quite enough of necessary this morning as it is."

For though it was out of his power to drug his patient for the operation itself, he had given him a strong opiate immediately afterwards, and to this La Rocheterie had very quickly succumbed.

"Yes, it has been worrying me," went on the old surgeon, "how to get that ball out without too much shock. . . . *You* look a bit white, my boy. Are you all right?"

"I am very much all right, thank you, sir," returned Laurent, pallid but smiling. For he, at any rate, had derived from the detestable business something which made what he had gone through worth while.

"And in the process of becoming quite a useful assistant to me you have not lost your zeal as a champion, eh?"

"Not a bit," said Laurent. "Though I admit that I would give a very great deal to get to the bottom of the business."

M. Perrelet flashed a shrewd glance at him. "You still don't think you would be sorry when you got there?"

Laurent drew himself up. "Not in the sense you mean, Monsieur. And surely you yourself, who have saved his life——"

"That's my job, Monsieur de Courtomer. It's nothing to me that the bullet I have just fished out of that young man's shoulder came from some old Chouan musket of the year one—look at it—nor that that young man was found lashed to a beech tree outside his own headquarters, nor that he has, undoubtedly, something very grave on his mind—my business is to set him on his legs again, if I can."

"Monsieur Perrelet," said Laurent earnestly, "I believe I can account for everything. He is shielding someone else. I am positive of it. It cannot be an agreeable thing to do; it has cost him terribly in the past, it is costing him terribly now, and as for the future——" He broke off rather abruptly.

M. Perrelet gave a little shake of the head; his smile was half amused, but half touched too. "My dear boy, excuse my saying so, but you are very young! It is only in romances that men do that sort of thing. In real life, when they see what it may lead to, they are not so quixotic. And, in my opinion, M. de la Rocheterie's demeanour is not consistent with innocence. He is in too much personal agony of mind—can you deny it? Why, otherwise, when I warned him just now that I was going to hurt him, should he have said to

himself, '*So much the better*'? If he were merely playing the scapegoat a young man as sensitively organised as he would hardly have welcomed my probe and scalpel because they gave him something else to think about! No, I am afraid your theory won't hold water." He put away his instruments, then suddenly walked back to the bed and stood for some time with his hands behind him, studying the unconscious face, with its strong, delicate features, much less as a doctor studies a patient than as one man scrutinises another to see what of his character he can read on his visage. Then he bent over the drugged sleeper, satisfied himself as to his condition, and came back again.

"The best argument for your view of the case, my young friend," he admitted, "lies of course on the pillow there. One can't, after all, look at that face and believe him capable of anything infamous—it was my thought when I first saw him, all blood and dust, on the floor in the hall more than a week ago. . . . Yet, if he is innocent, he has no right, to my thinking, to have deprived his party of his services to cover another man's misdoing. . . . Well, keep an eye on him. I will look in again about the hour he should wake."

Slowly the sunlight moved down the bed from the side window as Laurent sat by it, a book on his knee which he made no attempt to read. From time to time he took out and fingered at leisure his own private gain—the fall of the barrier which L'Oiseleur maintained between them . . . for how could he interpret the episode otherwise when Aymar's clenched right hand, suddenly and blindly putting itself forth, had encountered his wrist where he bent over the bed ready for emergencies, and had closed on it, gripping it hard. Moved by that significant act, Laurent had grasped the bandaged wrist in return. So when, under contracted brows, the red-brown eyes, unclosing, looked up desperately for a moment into his, though they were alight with pain and he was torn with concern, his heart had leapt to greet the moment. . . . Then M. Perrelet's hand made a movement, the bullet tinkled into the basin, and, the second after, with a deep sigh, Aymar's grip on the friendly wrist relaxed and his head rolled sideways. . . . Yes, how could he interpret otherwise that appeal in the hour of need?

As for M. Perrelet's arguments, Laurent was entirely unmoved by them. So far from considering La Rocheterie's demeanour incompatible with innocence, he thought it a marked proof of it. Would a man capable of betraying his

own troops be so bitter and sensitive about his own subsequent position? Surely he would expect some measure of contumely for his deed! And in Aymar's desolation of soul there was a fierce resentment. 'He *dared* to ask me!' he had said. No, that theory of his shielding another, once enunciated, gained immensely in probability. A man like the Aymar de la Rocheterie he had known last year would have done a thing like that without counting the terrible cost to himself, even as he had jumped without hesitation into the flooded river. If this Aymar, who had been so near death after paying part of it, found what remained almost more than he could endure, who could wonder? For whom had he done it—a friend, a comrade? He must love him extraordinarily. But how could anyone accept such a sacrifice, greater than that of life itself? Perhaps the unknown was not aware of it. Perhaps he was dead. It was to be hoped so, for then this immolation could, surely, cease.

Not for the first time in his vigil, Laurent bent forward and felt L'Oiseleur's pulse. This time the fingers of the sleeper suddenly twined themselves round his wrist again. Laurent let his hand stay in the unconscious clasp, and it was because it was there that he found the hot words of protest forming on his lips, though they went unuttered:—*Why did you do it? It is killing you, L'Oiseleur! You are of too fine stuff to stand the strain, the obloquy, the contempt of the contemptible!*

The drugged sleep, however, seemed to be breaking, for Laurent had not long sat so, his hand a prisoner, when Aymar began to stir. A contraction passed over his face. Another moment, and his eyes slowly unclosed, and he was looking at the watcher, half dreamily.

"It is over," said Laurent gently.

"Over? What is over?"

"The extraction—your shoulder. You fainted at the end, then the doctor gave you an opiate. You have slept for nearly four hours."

"I remember. Yes." His eyes fell on his own hand, and he immediately loosed his clasp and moved the hand away. Laurent reddened; but the next instant L'Oiseleur's lashes dropped again and he relapsed into slumber.

A little later M. Perrelet came in, expressed himself satisfied, and said that Laurent need not sit by him like a sentry unless he pleased. So the young man went over to his own side of the room and threw himself on his bed. Why

had La Rocheterie moved his hand away like that? Was he, after giving that glimpse of his necessity, going on as before? Laurent was sore, disappointed, and beginning to realise that the combined strain of anxiety, want of sleep and his charge's attitude was making him curiously tired.

He lay there some time till, hearing Aymar move, he jumped up and went round the screen and found him fully sensible, staring up at the ceiling with a rather set mouth.

"I did not know you were awake," said Laurent somewhat timidly. "Is the pillow all right for your shoulder? Is there anything I can do?"

"If it is not troubling you too much, I should like a drink," was the frigid reply.

Laurent lifted his head and gave him some water. To judge from the way he drank it, he must have come out from under the opiate parched with thirst. Why could he not have called for such a simple thing? Laurent suppressed a desire to ask, and when he had finished merely enquired if his shoulder were paining him much.

"Nothing out of the way, thank you." So Laurent, with an inward sigh, went round the bed to replace the glass. He suspected that the reply was far from the truth. When he got to the bottom of the bed Aymar de la Rocheterie spoke again.

"I am quite at a loss to know why you should do all this for me, Monsieur de Courtomer."

Laurent was goaded into replying, "All this! You do not give me much chance of doing anything!"

But Aymar, disregarding him, went on in his weak, uneven voice, "You put me under a very heavy obligation to you."

Laurent flushed. "I had much rather you did not look at it in that light. To do anything for you—although I know I am clumsy and inexperienced . . . I mean . . . you need not feel . . ." He stumbled; the set, unsmiling visage disconcerted him.

"It is very good of you," repeated L'Oiseleur in the same unmoved tones. "And you must not think that because I took advantage of your charity this morning I do not realise, equally with yourself . . . especially since Colonel Guitton's visit——"

But even he could get no further for the moment. Laurent removed his eyes from his face; it was suddenly tortured.

"—That you are dealing with an outcast, a leper," finished the voice inexorably.

"How can you talk like that!" broke out Laurent, half choking. "I—*charity*—you think I——" But adequate expression of his feelings was beyond him; besides, L'Oiseleur would not listen—merely overrode him. What could it be that made him behave like this? Was it possible that his brain was becoming affected by what he had been through, or that the pain which he would not now acknowledge, or the drug, or both, had flung him into a sort of delirium? But it was such a cold, purposeful delirium. . . . Laurent plucked feverishly at the coverlet, and at last lifted his eyes for an instant. "I do not believe a word of what that black-guard said. . . . I should have liked to kill him!" he added between his teeth. "—Of course," he went on after a second or two, studying the floor again, "it is obvious that you have been shot. I realise that it must have been done. . . ." But no reference, after all, to trees and tying up was possible.

"Exactly," said L'Oiseleur with a horrible calm. "You realise *how*—do you realise by *whom* it was done? . . . Yes, evidently you have been told that it was my own men, though perhaps you did not believe it. But . . . it is quite true!"

Laurent had the sensation that about five squares of the parquet flooring flew up and hit him on the head. He could feel the blood rushing to his face. *It was not true!*

He looked up, dazed, and saw Aymar de la Rocheterie scanning him in a way he could not interpret. "I see, indeed, that you had not believed it," came his voice, cool and faint. "Well, now I have convinced you. But in justice to my . . . my executioners, I should like you to know that they were not directly responsible for the state of my wrists. I did that myself, trying to get free—afterwards. . . . Have you ever been tied to a tree, Monsieur de Courtomer, and left there? Hardly, I suppose."

This must be stopped somehow. "Monsieur de la Rocheterie," said Laurent firmly, "I refuse to hear another word. But I am going to say just one thing myself. Your men may have shot you—since you tell me so I suppose I must believe you—but even you cannot make me think that they did it otherwise than under a misapprehension. The sun must fall from heaven before I can believe that you did—what rumour accuses you of! Surely you know that!"

He spoke with passion. The Vicomte de la Rocheterie stared at him out of his great sunken eyes, words visibly smitten from him. Then he dragged up his right hand and covered them. "You are . . . very hard to convince,"

he said with a catch of the breath. And at that moment, to Laurent's intense relief, M. Perrelet came in.

He looked from one to the other. "You have been talking to him," he said sharply to Laurent.

"No, I have been talking to him," put in his patient quickly.

"Then you will kindly not do it any more," grumbled the little doctor, stooping over him. "A nice state you have got yourself into! M. de Courtomer should have stopped you!"

Laurent had turned blindly away to the window. So it was true—his own men!

(10)

For about the sixth time that night Laurent dragged himself out of his bed and went over to his charge. The dawn was beginning. He was so tired that he could hardly stand, his eyes kept closing from lack of sleep, but his brain seemed to him unusually clear. Peering at the clock he saw that there wanted twenty minutes yet before La Rocheterie's bouillon was due. He dropped into the chair by the bed; it was not worth returning to his own again.

Even yet, after half a day and a night, he could scarcely realise it, though he had tried hard to face the reversal of what he had so stoutly upheld. That haggard young man who lay there asleep before him had really been through the horrors of execution at the hands of his own followers—and survived. His men, his own men who followed him with passion, who would, as he once said, have cut their hands off for him, had fastened him to a tree and deliberately shot him—L'Oiseleur, their brilliant and adored leader! Now he understood why he had said that he would never need his floating locks again; the laurels were indeed cut down! Now he understood why he was so sensitive about his lacerated wrists, so terribly bitter about the whole affair, so unapproachable! Why, it was enough to have sent him crazy—quite enough to make him beg to be allowed to die, as with his own ears Laurent had heard him!

Yet, since their painful conversation of yesterday afternoon, La Rocheterie's demeanour towards him had undergone a certain change. He had not said the things that hurt so much, and, in the earlier part of the night, when he had been restless and in pain after the operation, he had even asked, and almost naturally, for such alleviation as Laurent could

give, and had not paid him in those frigid thanks to which the young man would infinitely have preferred no thanks at all. Somehow, then, they *were* a little nearer to each other.

How thin he was getting to look—how increasingly transparent—worse than when Laurent had first seen him lying there like . . . what was it he had looked like? . . . A Crusader. . . . Had a Crusader ever been shot by his men? If so, they would have used bows and arrows . . . or was it arquebuses? . . . What exactly was an arquebus? . . . Arques. What had happened at Arques . . . ?

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He woke, to his dismay, to find his head down on his arm across the foot of his patient's bed. The birds were singing, and the hour for bouillon well past, but the wounded man was fortunately still asleep.

His own stolen slumber, however, had not refreshed Laurent, and, by the time that M. Perrelet appeared, he was wondering how he should ever get through the dressings. He always hated the business, and, now that he knew for certain who had made those wounds. . . . Then he was ashamed of what he termed his womanish feelings. It was not he who had to bear the pain morning after morning—and without a murmur, as La Rocheterie always did . . . as he wished sometimes he would not. But then all along he had never uttered a syllable of complaint at any physical stress.

"I'll be as quick as I can," he heard M. Perrelet whisper to his patient as he took up the forceps.

. . . At least Laurent supposed that he was whispering—or was it because there was suddenly such a loud buzzing in his own ears? The surgeon's figure swelled to a large size; then receded till it was about the measure of a doll. But, not realising in the least what was happening to him, Laurent still stood at his post with a face, though he did not know it, very similar in hue to that on the pillow.

The next thing of which he was fully conscious was that he was seated in a chair right away from the bed, at the open window, and that M. Perrelet, now restored to his everyday dimensions, was undoing the collar of his uniform.

"What is the matter?" asked the young man in a dazed way. "Why am I here?"

"Because I didn't want you fainting and falling across

the bed," responded M. Perrelet briskly. "Luckily my patient called my attention to you just in time. Drink this, and sit there quietly."

"But——" protested Laurent.

"Drink this!" repeated M. Perrelet firmly.

And so the brandy which was poured out ready for L'Oiseleur was drunk by his nurse.

"Fainting?" murmured Laurent. "Was that it? But the dressing . . . ?" And he tried to get up.

M. Perrelet pushed him back. "Sit there, I tell you. You are not indispensable. I will deal with you afterwards."

He disappeared behind the screen. Laurent, his head feeling like a ball of wool, sat there ashamed and confused, conscious that he had deserted his post, and still not quite understanding what had happened to him. Through the woolly mist he heard the murmur of Aymar's voice—it sounded like an interrogation—and the doctor's reply, quite clear: "It was a little too much for him this morning, I think. He was tired, I expect. I ought to have noticed sooner. . . . Now we will proceed with this shoulder of yours."

He proceeded, presumably, for there was no more conversation. Laurent gazed out of the window.

After a considerable interval M. Perrelet emerged, washed his hands and came over to him.

"Now, young man, I want a few words with you. No, stay where you are. I have settled M. de la Rocheterie quite comfortably. But I don't want a second patient on my hands." He dropped his voice. "How much sleep did you have last night?—I thought so. And the night before? You are getting worn out. I am an old fool, but I never meant you to do without sleep like this—no one, of course, could stand it. Why have you been doing it—it's not necessary now?"

The answer was very simple—because his charge would not call him, so he must be on the alert the whole time. But Laurent was not going to give it.

M. Perrelet's little eyes scrutinised his downcast visage. "H'm! perhaps I can guess! . . . And yet I fancy you would really rather have this old butcher hurting you than him, eh?" (Laurent, aghast at his insight, turned crimson.) "Well, it is clear that I have been very inconsiderate of you. You are to lie down at once and have a nap; I will stay here with him for a little." And, to ensure his commands being obeyed,

he stood over Laurent till he had stretched himself on the bed.

The young man himself was surprised to find how desirable that bed was. . . . He floated away into slumber . . . delicious! Then he came out of it again to find M. Perrelet almost in the same place, looking at him.

"I fell asleep for a moment," he said apologetically.

The surgeon smiled. "Mon enfant, you have slept for an hour and ten minutes. I should not wake you now but that your dinner is just coming up and that I have something to tell you. You need fresh air and a little change of scene, so I have arranged with Major Aubert that you are to go out for a walk every day on the terrace. No, there is no question of parole, and there is a sentry posted, so don't try to escape and get yourself shot. You can take your first promenade this afternoon."

Laurent gave Aymar his dinner and had his own. When the orderly had removed it he approached his charge to settle him for the sleep which he was supposed to have in the afternoon. No reference had yet been made to his own morning's performance, and he hoped that none would be. But he had been conscious for the last five minutes that L'Oiseleur's eyes were following him very intently, and, as he now came round the bed to pull the curtain over the window beside it, La Rocheterie suddenly said, in a very different voice from any in which he had yet addressed him—at Arbelles:

"Do you think, Monsieur de Courtomer, that you can ever forgive me?"

It was really less the words than the tone which surprised Laurent. He half turned, his hand on the curtain.

"On the contrary, Monsieur de la Rocheterie," he said with an embarrassed little laugh, "it is I who ought to make the most humble apologies to you!"

"For what?" asked Aymar, looking up at him. "For having worn yourself out with looking after me night and day? For having robbed yourself of your sleep, endangered your health perhaps—at any rate brought yourself to this pass of fatigue . . . and all for a man who . . ." He did not finish the sentence. "On my soul, I cannot think why you should have done it, nor why I should have been possessed by such a demon of ingratitude. . . . Monsieur de Courtomer, it was not wholly ingratitude! Do you know what it is to resent pity? Yet I ought to be on my knees in thankfulness that anyone in the world should do anything for me—now;

and that anyone should really care what happens to me . . .”

His voice broke and he turned his head away; his hand on the coverlet clenched and unclenched itself.

And Laurent, to his great comfort, was deserted at this crisis by his British heritage. He abandoned the curtain, his rather constrained attitude, everything. “Oh, La Rocheterie, how could you ever doubt it! Don’t you know that I would give a great deal more than a few nights’ rest to see you well again? Why, I came by way of Locmélar in the hopes of meeting with you, and when, after I was captured, by an extraordinary coincidence I saw you being brought here, unconscious, I tried to get sent back with you—only I tried too late. *Pity*—no! You surely do not think that I have looked after you for any other reason than because I . . . wanted to!”

He had gripped the transparent, tell-tale hand. For the first time it stayed in his grasp. And L’Oiseleur turned his head back again, and looked at him, tears in his eyes.

“I suppose I must believe it! You have proved it, God knows! Do you know I had a dream—at first I thought it was a dream—of your having fallen asleep, tired out, against the foot of my bed early this morning? But it was true! And you nearly collapsed just now. . . . It is I who ought to be adjuring you not to talk! . . .” He gave a weak little laugh, and his fingers moved in Laurent’s. “And M. Perrelet tells me that you choose to be in here when you might have had a room to yourself elsewhere! I thought you were obliged to be here, and though you . . . *though they had told you* . . . you were humane—and you had met me before, and felt perhaps that here was a means of repaying what you insisted on calling a debt, and so——”

Laurent, inspired to rather a bold course, broke in. “If you will forgive me for saying so, was not our having met before just why you disliked my being here? Could you not either forget that fact, or—what I should prefer—try to realise that to me you are, and always will be, exactly what you were in England, or in Paris last year?”

“Oh, my God!” said Aymar to himself, and tried to take his hand away.

But Laurent would not let it go. He knelt down by the bed. “Yes, I know that you feel there is a difference. But I knew—I knew about the slur on you before I entered the room. Nothing that these people say has any effect on me—if you would only believe that! Does not that make it

possible for you to take . . . anything I may have the good fortune to do for you, as you would from any other . . . friend?"

He brought out the word rather low, for he felt that it was a little presumptuous after all.

"*Friend!*" Aymar caught him up unsteadily. "No, you must not call yourself my friend, de Courtomer! You will not find me desirable, even as an acquaintance, now. Do you forget that I have lost my good name . . . and not only with the enemy?"

"I do not forget it," replied Laurent gravely. "But I know that you can recover it when you wish."

A bitter astonishment dawned in the face on the pillow.

"After what happened to me in the Bois des Fauvettes? No; my reputation is as much damaged by those bullets as my body."

He made himself say it, evidently, but he said it.

"But you cannot deny," urged Laurent, "that that horrible business was a misapprehension. You must pardon my conjecture, but I fancy I know of what kind it was."

Aymar de la Rocheterie shut his eyes and slightly shook his head. "Impossible!" He lay so a moment without moving, his hand still in Laurent's, and then, reopening his eyes, said in a rather exhausted voice, "Some day, perhaps, I will tell you the story. But . . . just now . . . there are things which I cannot tell anyone. I have to ask your forbearance for that, just as I most sincerely ask your pardon for my behaviour, my want of consideration. I daresay unhappiness makes one blind, and I have not been . . . very happy."

His hand stiffened. Laurent put his other over it. "There is nothing to forgive. And I shall never ask you for an explanation. For I can guess your secret, La Rocheterie. You have taken someone else's guilt upon your shoulders. How long you intend to shield this other person at such a heavy cost to yourself is not my affair—but I hope it will not be for long," he added ingenuously. "I am not going to ask you if my theory is true, for to be quite consistent you would have to say that it was not. . . . I shall leave you to sleep now."

"Monsieur de Courtomer, I assure you——" began L'Oiseleur in a very low voice as his hand was loosed.

Laurent smiled as he got up and drew the curtain over the window. Of course he *would* deny it! But his smile died to concern as he looked at the bed again.

"I have been tiring you," he said remorsefully. "It is a good thing that I hear the guard coming to remove me. Just let me turn the pillow over, and if there is nothing you want I will leave you in peace."

But peace was not the predominant expression on Aymar de la Rocheterie's face as Laurent took a last look at it before leaving the room.

(II)

The terrace at Arbelles was wide, bounded at each end by a wall. It had the house itself for frontier on one side; on the other it fell sharply to a long bowling green, which in its turn gave way to meadow. Only one flight of steps led down from it, and at the top of these paced an armed sentry. But after eight days' confinement in one room, and that a sick-room, merely to be in the open again gave Laurent an illusory sense of freedom which was slightly intoxicating. And his mind was full of a deep content—the barrier between him and L'Oiseleur was down . . . at last!

Presently there sauntered out the tall young officer of *chasseurs à cheval* whom he had seen on the day of his arrival. They saluted each other with much punctiliousness, and the young man, naming himself as Lieutenant Rigault, asked if he might join him. So they walked up and down together, commenting at first on nothing more significant than the fine weather. Laurent yawned once or twice.

"I suppose I ought not to tell you," said the chasseur, flicking at the gravel with his switch, "but we have just received bad news this morning. Your party has had a thumping success."

"Ah!" said Laurent, brightening.

"Yes; du Tremblay has captured Chalais and effected his junction with some other leaders; the far side of the Aven will be very uncomfortable for us now unless we can dislodge them. I expect there's some language flying about in our poor Colonel's vicinity to-day—especially as he has got a nasty wound in the leg. He was so set on getting the better of du Tremblay."

"He was indeed," answered Laurent meaningly. "And M. du Tremblay has got the better of him! I *am* delighted!"

Opponent though he was, the young officer could not help smiling. "Yes, your . . . your not very reputable roommate upstairs played him a fine trick when he refused to give

him a hint of du Tremblay's plans! The Colonel had been absolutely counting on his . . . co-operation. He is rather a dark horse, that gentleman! By the way, since he is, I hear, out of danger, you will be parting company, I suppose. As it is, I——"

"Shall we break off this conversation?" interposed Laurent very coldly. "If you cannot speak in less offensive terms of my friend the Vicomte de la Rocheterie——"

The most naked astonishment looked out at him from Lieutenant Rigault's countenance. "What!" he exclaimed, "you call him friend—the man who betrayed his own followers!"

"If he had done that I certainly should not call him friend," retorted Laurent. "But that is, of course, the most outrageous slander. And there he lies, helpless! . . . Would you mind telling me the exact form in which this calumny reached you here? or did your commanding officer first put it about?"

"Certainly not," responded the young chasseur rather stiffly. "What happened was that Colonel Richard, over at Saint-Goazec, sent an officer here last Saturday week to say that he had disposed of the bulk of L'Oiseleur's force by an ambush at Pont-aux-Rochers. (It was important for us to know this, because they had been a menace to us, lying where they did.) The officer told us how it had occurred—in fact he was full of it. L'Oiseleur himself had sent the information!"

"How patently absurd!" said Laurent contemptuously. "As if a man would run his own head into the lion's mouth in that manner!"

"But M. de la Rocheterie's head was quite safe," observed Rigault dryly. "He was not present at the affair of the bridge—you did not know that? I assure you that it is true. . . . And it is certain that Colonel Richard did not invent the story about the information, for his officer said he was rather distressed about it.—And indeed, if it was false, why did La Rocheterie's men shoot him?"

"Why? Because the lie had already been well circulated," retorted Laurent, who could not meet this thrust by the indignant denial of the fact which he would have given yesterday.—"Now I will ask you a question in my turn, Monsieur. Granting for a moment the possibility of L'Oiseleur's ever doing such an incredible thing, what do you suppose he did it for? He must have had some motive!"

Rigault shook his head. "Ah, there you have me. Nobody knows that—except, presumably, Colonel Richard."

"And again," said Laurent eagerly, "do you think that a man who had sunk to such a depth as that would be likely to resist, at the risk of his life, the abominable inquisition about M. du Tremblay's plans to which your Colonel subjected him last Friday, when he was scarcely able to speak? Do you know that the proceeding all but killed him, and that by a few words—one word—he could have saved himself? If, as you pretend to believe, he betrayed his own men, why should he go to the last extremity not to betray du Tremblay's?"

The Imperialist shrugged his shoulders. "Possibly because the necessary inducement, whatever it was, was lacking in this case."

"What the devil do you mean by that, Monsieur?" asked Laurent, firing up.

"I don't mean anything in particular," replied the young officer. "How could I? But I think the Colonel was fully justified in expecting La Rocheterie to make no difficulty about deciphering those notes, and though perhaps he went rather far, you must remember that the knowledge of their contents, could we have had it, might have——"

"Tell me," interrupted Laurent ruthlessly, "was it purely for the sake of those cursed notes that your Colonel wanted M. de la Rocheterie kept alive?"

Lieutenant Rigault looked uncomfortable. "Naturally the Colonel was anxious for the information, and du Tremblay's name was at the top, and as La Rocheterie had——"

"You admit it! Permit me to tell you then——"

"No, I can't permit it!" exclaimed Rigault, interrupting in his turn, and somewhat heated. "I can't stand here and listen to abuse of my commanding officer, and I can't call you to account for it because you are a prisoner. I think, Monsieur, that you are rather taking advantage of your immunity!"

This view did silence the critic, who made some kind of apology, on which his companion observed that they had better not discuss L'Oiseleur any more. So for the rest of the time they spoke of other matters.

Nevertheless Laurent re-entered his place of captivity tingling with exultation, for there was no doubt that the Royalists had scored heavily. Also, it was heaven to know that Guilton was baffled—and damaged.

"I hope you have enjoyed your walk, Monsieur de Courtomer," observed the phantom of L'Oiseleur, who was not asleep, but lying just as he had left him.

"Immensely, thank you. And I have brought you some very good news."

"Good news—for me!" The tone gave Laurent pause, but only for a moment. With much enthusiasm he repeated the tidings.

For the first time the drawn face lit up. "Chalais! He has captured Chalais! It is authentic, the news?"

"Evidently. And he has you to thank for his success!"

"Me to thank for his success!" La Rocheterie was obviously startled. "He might have had me to thank for his failure.—But that, at least, has been spared me," he added, as if to himself.

"But, La Rocheterie," exclaimed the herald, somewhat carried off his feet, "do you not realise that you almost gave your life to keep his secret inviolate? Perhaps I ought not to tell you, but it was touch and go with you afterwards, you know! If M. Perrelet——"

But such a change had come over Aymar's face that Laurent was brought to a standstill. The visible relief—the more than relief—was wiped out in an instant, and without a word he put the back of his bandaged right wrist across his eyes. Laurent had laid too rash a hand upon Friday's bitter wound.

Yet, out of his abhorrence of its author, a thing came to his lips which carried, in its unconscious boyishness and simplicity, a sort of balm of its own. For when, standing there embarrassed and hesitating, he suddenly blurted out, "That scoundrel has got a bullet or something in his leg, thank God!" L'Oiseleur removed his screening arm and looked at him. And, to Laurent's surprise, the mouth which seemed to have forgotten how to smile relaxed after a moment into a semblance of amusement.

"Monsieur de Courtomer," he said slowly, "I think you must have the gift of . . . of partisanship *in excelsis*!"

And, whether he or the young man standing above him made the first movement, their fingers certainly met.

CHAPTER IV

THE CAPTIVE HAWK

"Altho' his back be at the wa',
Another was the fautor;
Altho' his back be at the wa',
Yet here's his health in water!
He gat the skaith, he gat the scorn,
I lo'e him but the better;
Tho' in the muir I hide forlorn,
I'll drink his health in water.
Altho' his back be at the wa',
Yet here's his health in water!"

Jacobite Ballad.

"In short, sir, though you can be infernally provoking, it has been a pleasure to serve you."—STEVENSON, *St. Ives*.

(I)

M. PERRELET, followed by an orderly with an armful of pillows, came briskly down the corridor one afternoon ten days later, and entered a certain guarded room.

"Well, my children, and what are you doing now?" he demanded benignantly of its inhabitants.

"I am having my knowledge of English extended, sir," responded one of them from the bed, smiling faintly. "M. de Courtomer found an English book on the shelf there, and he is reading it to me. . . . Are those the pillows you promised me this morning?"

He still looked extraordinarily bloodless, and even thinner, but there was more life about him. Laurent had got up, and stood glancing from M. Perrelet to L'Oiseleur with an air of being rather proud of his charge. Indeed, to-day was an important milestone; having, a couple of days ago, been promoted from his recumbent position to about three pillows, La Rocheterie was now going to be propped up with many into a sitting posture for an hour or two—hence the orderly's load. And in a few minutes the little doctor and Laurent proceeded so to prop him.

"You may feel a trifle giddy at first," remarked the former, surveying him critically. "When you are tired, ask your nurse to take them away again. . . . And this is your English book? H'm. *Le Vicaire de Vackfeel*. What is this Vackfeel—a place or a person? Once I could read English, though not speak it. I read the poet Shackspeer."

"Monsieur Perrelet," observed Laurent, "you are a mine of knowledge, and of everything desirable. And, as you have brought M. de la Rocheterie all those plump pillows, you could no doubt bring me what I want."

"And what is that, my boy?" asked the surgeon, looking up from the pages of Goldsmith which, sitting on the edge of his patient's bed, he was turning over, his lips very much pursed.

"A letter," responded M. de Courtomer. "A letter from a lady—from my mother, in short. Though I do not know why you should play postman. I suppose that if I get a reply to mine, which I wrote—oh, a fortnight ago—it will come through the same channel, those gentlemen downstairs?"

"You had left yours open, I suppose?"

"Yes, but I contrived to put in a good deal of what I wanted to say. And now I wish to hear how my dear mother is bearing my loss."

"I cannot tell you that," replied the little doctor, twinkling, "but any ordinary—or extraordinary—outside news I can supply you with, if you are pining for it. To-day, however, I have heard nothing in particular."

"But might you not get into trouble for telling us, if there were?"

The bounce which M. Perrelet gave shook the bed. "Sacrebleu, young man, am I a soldier? I thank God, no! Do I care, either, whether King or Emperor rules this distracted country, provided he makes haste and does it, and I get my drugs delivered when I order them? If I could hope that those confounded diligence-robbing Chouans of yours had swallowed what I was having sent last week I might feel consoled, for in that event some of those long-haired gentry would still be suffering from stomach-ache. But I have not forgiven the Imperialists either for opening a case because they pretended to think it contained smuggled ammunition. There's nothing to choose between the adherents of either side. No; I am like a character in one of le Shackspeer's plays—I forget which, but this book brings back my little English.

He says, à propos of some quarrel (and I say it with him) 'A pla-gué on bot' your 'ousses!' "

The linguist making of the first noun a dissyllable with, as was natural, the continental 'a,' and of the second the French word which means a horse-cloth, Laurent stooped hurriedly to the floor after nothing in particular, and even L'Oiseleur bit his lip.

"Is not M. Perrelet's pronunciation of English rather singular?" he enquired after the doctor had gone. "You are not always very polite about mine, but even I had not the faintest idea what he was saying just now."

"I should not have known myself, but that it was a quotation," confessed his instructor, laughing. "Are you comfortable like that—not too high?"

"Quite comfortable—but a little out of my bearings. Still, I was coming to know the geography of the ceiling rather overwell. . . . And now that I am thus erected, I suppose you will insist on my reading that book to myself? I wonder, de Courtomer, what is the next reformation that you will try to work on me, after my health and my English?"

And, as he held out his blanched hand with its seamed wrist for the *Vicar of Wakefield*, he suddenly gave his companion a brief glimpse of his once enchanting smile.

Laurent went red with pleasure. Yes, this was indeed a day to be remembered—the first time that L'Oiseleur had smiled in earnest since he was brought to Arbelles. He gave him the book, and said that he did not really expect him to struggle with it.

"But," said his charge, "I shall like to read more about this pastor who has his living wife's epitaph framed over his mantelpiece to encourage her in virtue! It seems to me that he must be a person of humour."

Highly pleased at this unwonted manifestation of interest, Laurent sat down by the window. Captivity had hardly yet had time to be irksome; he had been too much occupied. But, even if La Rocheterie's life no longer depended on his care, he had no visions of escape, though obviously the climb down from the unbarred window presented only one difficulty to a young and vigorous man—the sentry below. Laurent's heart, however, was chained for the present in this room, where he had acquired something personally more precious than what he had lost. It still seemed strange and wonderful to him that his hero had been given over to him like a child—like an infant, indeed, at one stage, requiring to be fed from a

spoon. He was not so helpless now, though he was still very weak. But, since the day when they had come to an understanding, it was nothing but a pleasure to do things for him. And L'Oiseleur was so good, so patient, so grateful!

All at once L'Oiseleur's own voice, with the lightness gone out of it, broke in on these reflections. "You were speaking just now about having written a letter, Comte. Have you writing-materials there, and if so might I——"

"Of course," replied Laurent, jumping up and fetching them.

M. de la Rocheterie did not get on very fast, however—whether from physical or mental disabilities was not clear. At last his pencil ceased its labours altogether, and the writer put his head back against his high pillows. Perhaps the letter was a difficult one; it might well be!

After a few minutes' inaction he tried again; added a word or two, and desisted a second time. Then he looked in Laurent's direction.

"I am so sorry, de Courtomer," he said rather breathlessly. "I suppose it is these pillows . . . it's ridiculous, but I feel . . ."

What he felt was pretty obvious now. Laurent grabbed away M. Perrelet's erection and laid him flat again where, after a little, he got the better of his faintness. On this, rather to Laurent's surprise, he asked if he might dictate the rest of his letter, as he wanted to finish it.

So Laurent retrieved the pencil and paper and sat down by the bed. Very little was on the paper.

"Please read it over to me," said the writer. And Laurent read these words aloud:

"MY DEAR GRANDMOTHER,—You will, I expect, have heard that my little force was almost annihilated about three weeks ago, and you may have been wondering——"

Laurent looked enquiringly at the bed.

"—'Why you have had no news from me,'" finished its occupant slowly. And Laurent completed the sentence, trying to guess what the next would be. What would he—what could he—tell his grandmother about his plight?

"I was slightly wounded," resumed Aymar in a colourless tone (Laurent involuntarily raising his eyebrows as he transcribed this statement), "'and am now a prisoner, but I have been and am very well looked after.'" He let his

eyes dwell for a second on his amanuensis as he dictated this, and his voice had a different inflection though his expression did not change. "There is therefore no need for anxiety on my behalf."

In the pause that followed Laurent wondered whether it were of set purpose that he had not mentioned his place of captivity. L'Oiseleur resumed:

"Please tell Avoys that her letter reached me just before I"—he paused again—"before I was captured. She will understand that I cannot answer it at present as I should have wished. And do not be uneasy if you do not hear from me again for some time."

"That is all," said the letter-writer, suddenly appearing exhausted. "If you will kindly give it to me I will sign it."

"Well, there could hardly be a balder letter of reassurance," thought Laurent. "Shall I address it," he asked.

"If you please," said L'Oiseleur. "Madame la Vicomtesse de la Rocheterie, Château de Sessignes, près Merléac.' I am going to ask M. Perrelet to post it. If he does not feel justified in doing so I shall tear it up. It is not going through their hands downstairs!"

And, as Laurent assented sympathetically, he added, "But I am afraid you will think that I am not a very candid person, de Courtomer! It would hardly be kind, however, to tell my grandmother the truth about my 'capture,' would it? And there is no actual lie, as you can see, in that letter."

Laurent grew hot in a moment. A faint, half-tortured amusement showed in the red-brown eyes. "Well, perhaps M. Perrelet will refuse to take it, and that will end the matter," said their owner. And Laurent had the strange idea that, on the whole, he would be glad of it.

But M. Perrelet, when asked next morning, made no bones about it at all, merely repeating his Shakspeer quotation rather more execrably than before.

(2)

It was, indeed, M. Perrelet who reigned supreme over the affairs of the two prisoners, and, thanks to him, L'Oiseleur had the best of everything. Aubert, the impassive Major, remained in command of the garrison during this fortunately prolonged absence of Colonel Guitton—Aubert who, according to Laurent, was a mere shell of a man and did not really

exist. Certainly they never saw him, nor wished to do so. But with Lieutenant Rigault Laurent was striking up quite a friendship.

In these last ten days M. de Courtomer had ceased to exercise himself so deeply over the problem of Pont-aux-Rochers, though he had by no means ceased entirely to think about it. And even if speculation had quite died down it would have been revived by two nocturnal surprises which occurred about this time.

The first was a perfectly unheralded and abrupt ejaculation made by L'Oiseleur in his sleep one night. Laurent was lying wide awake when his companion's voice suddenly cut the silence with—"Tell the truth, de Fresne!"—that, and no more. After a second or two's amazement, Laurent tiptoed over to his bed to discover that he was, undoubtedly, talking in his sleep. But that clueless fragment—more like a command than an entreaty—out of the brain which held the secret, which was busy with it, evidently, in dreams, had it given the name of the man whom L'Oiseleur was shielding at such cost . . . or had it not? Nor, having heard it as he did, dared Laurent ask.

But two nights later he was wakened out of a very sound slumber to hear a thick and agonised voice saying in the darkness, "I shall never be there in time now! . . . Get on, you brute! . . . Six miles yet . . . O God! O God!" Then came actual sounds of struggle, and Laurent jumped half-terrified out of bed and struck a light, to find Aymar writhing about, repeating between clenched teeth, "I can't get my hands free—I can't get my hands free!" and then, gasping, "Make them be quick about it, for God's sake!"

Laurent set down the candle and laid hold of the scarred wrists. "La Rocheterie, La Rocheterie, wake up!"

"How dare you touch me!" cried the sleeper excitedly, trying to throw off the grasp, his eyes still shut. Then the bonds of nightmare suddenly loosed, and he opened his eyes and lay there panting.

After a moment he put his hand to his damp forehead. "I was dreaming," he got out confusedly. "It was nothing . . . I am so sorry I disturbed you . . . if you would just take those ropes away—no, what am I talking about! I am awake now . . . go back to bed, de Courtomer."

But he could not, surely, have been thoroughly awake, for when Laurent, with an exclamation of "I believe you have

started your shoulder bleeding!" tore open his shirt and began to repair the slight mischief caused by the bandages having slipped, Aymar, with a sudden gleam in his eyes, seized his wrists and tried mutely but passionately to hold him off. And Laurent could not bear to master him by force, as he might so easily have done.

"La Rocheterie!" he said, looking down at him almost sternly, "this is not worthy of you! Take your hands away!"

For a second the weak, half-frenzied grip tightened, then it relaxed altogether, and L'Oiseleur obeyed him—to Laurent's secret amazement—and turned his unhappy face away while measures were taken that the dressings should not slip a second time.

In fact when M. Perrelet came next morning he exclaimed at his assistant's bandaging. "You might have been lashing something to a mast!" he observed, and asked why his patient had not complained. But Aymar said gravely, "I should not dare to question anything M. de Courtomer did to me. He is too commanding." And he gave the confused Laurent a look oddly compounded of sadness, mischief and affection.

(3)

Another week passed. Laurent received a letter from his mother, containing sympathetic messages to L'Oiseleur, and the information that the Aunts considered Laurent honoured as sharing his captivity, both of which announcements L'Oiseleur had received very stiffly. And for the rest of the day he had looked . . . Laurent had seen that look before, but he had never put a name to it . . . he had looked haunted.

That night, after Laurent was in bed, his fellow-captive suddenly asked, "What was M. Perrelet saying to you this morning about Napoleon's despatching troops to the West?"

"That something like twenty-five battalions of the line are being sent against Brittany and Vendée, besides cavalry and what not. It is flattering . . . if only one were free!"

"If *you* were—yes!"

"But I was only an aide-de-camp," faltered Laurent.

"The more lucky you! *You* had no men to throw away!"

He was tormenting himself about those miserable 'Eper-viers' of his, then—those scoundrels who did not deserve

it! It was not easy for Laurent to realise that L'Oiseleur's lost legion consisted of two parts—the victims of the disaster at the bridge, and those who had subsequently made their leader a victim too—and he tended to confound them both in one burning horror and hatred.

"Eveno, for instance," went on the sad voice in the darkness, "Eveno, who used to follow me like a dog—you remember, perhaps, my speaking of him in England—I do not know whether he is killed or a prisoner; he is just missing, like so many others . . ."

"I remember about Eveno," said Laurent gently. The name brought the 'fairy tale' back to him at once. "I suppose," he proceeded, almost without reflecting, "that the *jartier* is now in the possession of our friends downstairs—much good may it do them! I noticed long ago, of course, that it was not on your arm."

"The *jartier*!" exclaimed its late possessor, and gave a harsh little laugh. "No, the Imperialists have not got it, nor my men either. I once told you that I put no faith in it, de Courtomer. Nevertheless, if I had it now, I should not be lying here, despised even by my enemies. . . . No, I do not refer to the running water legend; I should rather say again—did I believe in the amulet at all—that the *jartier* had carried me safely through that river of yours. . . . *I wish it had not!* . . . Good-night."

Laurent lay silent after that, looking from his bed at the summer stars. Yes, there could be no doubt that Aymar was bitterly regretting the too heavy sacrifice he had made. If only, only he would throw down the burden he had assumed! But what if he *could* not throw it down—what if he were entangled in a situation from which it was no longer in his power to extricate himself at will, if, by some trick of Fate not anticipated when he took his generous resolution, he were a prisoner indeed, in the most terrible kind of captivity . . . and knew it!

The idea came on Laurent like a blow over the heart, and Arcturus, pulsating out there in the limitless heavens, had passed out of sight before he made any effort after slumber.

(4)

But whatever truth there might be in Laurent's most unwelcome theory, L'Oiseleur's relapses into gloom and

bitterness were separated by periods when someone resembling the old and charming Aymar was visible once more. After all, he was young, and Laurent too was young—younger still—and at times the youth of both of them surged up and over. Such a time was that day when, returning from his promenade on the terrace, Laurent announced to his companion that their captivity would henceforth be shared by a third individual—and then, at sight of his dismayed face, burst out laughing, and told him to wait until he had shown him the individual in question. He thereupon fetched a drinking-glass, turned his back, and after a moment deposited on the bed, in this transparent prison, an enormous grasshopper, as green as a leaf.

“Take it away!” said L’Oiseleur, recoiling. “It will get out . . . and I don’t want it on me!”

Laurent sat himself down on the bed too. “No, it won’t. Besides, I’m going to tame it. You know that it is *de rigueur* for prisoners to tame mice and spiders, and this is better—of such a pleasing sylvan colour. I found him on the terrace. We will call him Vert-Vert; the parrot in the poem could not have been greener.—‘Il était beau, brillant, leste et volage.’ Look how he is feeling about with those enormous horns!”

“Poor devil!” said Aymar, studying the captive. “I should let it go again if I were you, *de Courtomer*.”

“Very well,” quoth Laurent and lifted the glass.

“Not here, you imbecile!” But Vert-Vert, after one second’s reflection, had vanished into space. Yet, as his colour quickly betrayed him on the white quilt, he was recaptured without much difficulty at the foot of the bed, amid protests from its occupant, who did not, however, seem really annoyed—rather on the verge of being amused.

And indeed it was through Vert-Vert’s agency that the next day was rendered remarkable; for it was the day on which L’Oiseleur actually laughed.

Laurent had been racking his brains for the most striking means of introducing Vert-Vert to M. Perrelet’s notice, the great difficulty, however, being that the lively insect would not stay where he was put. All at once an idea came to him.

“I have it, Aymar!” he exclaimed . . . and pulled himself up short as the name slipped out. “—I beg your pardon!”

“Why?” asked L’Oiseleur, smiling. “I should like it. May I venture to do the same?”

"Yes, indeed!" said Laurent, colouring. And he added ingenuously, "I only wish my name were as beautiful as yours."

"Is it beautiful?" asked its possessor, raising his eyebrows. "I never thought of it. There has been so many in our family since the first, who was a Crusader.—But go on with your plan for introducing M. Perrelet to Vert-Vert."

Laurent was staring at him. That vivid impression of his own on his first entry to this room had justification then . . . He came back with a jump to his proposal. It needed some argument to get Aymar to agree to it, but when M. Perrelet came into the room half an hour later Laurent was chuckling to think how little one would have imagined that the grave young man who greeted him so demurely from his pillows was cherishing under the bedclothes, like any school-boy, a large green grasshopper to let fly in his physician's face when he started to dress his wounds.

Not only, indeed, had L'Oiseleur entered into this childishness, but he had, as the event showed, planned an improvement upon it. For he withheld the insect enclosed in his hand from M. Perrelet altogether, and launched it instead, at an unexpected moment during the dressing of his shoulder, at his partner in guilt on the other side of the bed. Laurent started back with an exclamation as the ill-starred acrobat blundered against his chin and then fell into the little bowl of water which he held, and Aymar buried his face in the pillow, laughing like a boy.

A slow smile came over M. Perrelet's countenance as the situation dawned upon him. "*Ah!*" he said to himself in a tone of satisfaction. "But if there are any more of the *Locustidæ* in your bed, Monsieur de la Rocheterie——"

"Do forgive me, sir!" pleaded Aymar, emerging from the pillow. "It was this follower of Buffon here. . . . Oh, it's gone again . . . it's on *me!*"

"*Locusta viridissima*, extremely agile," commented M. Perrelet. "For goodness' sake get the insect under control again, Monsieur de Courtomer, if I'm ever to finish this dressing!"

(5)

But Vert-Vert, who was to have enlivened their captivity, stayed with them only three days. On the third he sprang through the open window by Aymar's bed and was no more

seen. Aymar blamed Laurent for letting him loose on the counterpane, Laurent retorted that the person under the counterpane was in charge. He was always in hopes of finding another on the terrace, but he did not succeed.

The days went on. It was June now. Aymar was slowly gaining strength, but he had not yet left his bed. Almost every day Laurent would read to him a little, but, though he always had a courteous appearance of attention, the reader sometimes wondered whether he were really listening. He would occasionally read himself, but never for long; if one turned round after a while the book had invariably slipped from his hands, and he was lying absorbed in thought . . . and looking haunted.

It was impossible to pretend that L'Oiseleur was an exhilarating comrade of captivity. And though he made efforts, as was plain—rather pathetic efforts—to be cheerful, the gaiety which is pumped up from the depths of a heavy heart lacks sparkle. In fact even ordinary conversation was often extremely difficult, for with a man under such a cloud and so sensitive, there was scarcely a subject in the past, present or future which was not capable of wounding. Laurent's own short and uneventful history had always seemed an innocuous topic, but one day he wished he had not dilated even on that.

He had been describing an incident in his childhood, when he thought he had lost his mother during a game of hide-and-seek in the garden, when Aymar suddenly began, "My last recollection of my mother is of looking for her in a garden—at least I suppose you would call it a garden, though it had high walls round, and no flowers. But I did not find her . . . ever."

Laurent looked over at him with a kind of catch at the heart. Aymar had taken out a spray of wallflower from the glass by his bed, and was holding it in his bloodless fingers.

"I was in the prison of Port Libre, you know," he went on, his eyes fixed on the flower, "with my mother and father—and my uncle—in '94. I was five years old then. My mother could not bear to leave me behind in our house in Paris when my father and she were arrested. She must have thought that they would not be detained long. . . . My father was just my age when he was guillotined. Yes, I used to play in that flowerless garden when it was fine—and the summer of '94, I have been told since, was very fine. . . . But the day

they left me it was too hot to play; I think I must have had a headache, for I remember my mother dipping her handkerchief in water and putting it round my head, and kissing me a great many times. She was only a girl. I have the handkerchief still. . . . And I looked for her that day in the garden, all round the great acacia tree that was there—I can see its rough, channelled bark now—I looked every day . . . and I asked everybody . . . A week's delay would have saved them; they were executed on the second of Thermidor."

"And you . . . afterwards?" asked Laurent with some difficulty.

"After Robespierre's fall I was taken to my uncle's widow, who had not been arrested. She had one little girl, my cousin, now Mme de Villecresne. I was with my young aunt till she died—of grief, as I know now—two years later, and then my cousin and I went to our grandmother at Sessignes.—So you can imagine that a man with memories like mine——" And there he stopped and relapsed into silence, his hand closing convulsively over the wallflower, which Laurent found, later, on the floor, a mere crushed ball of petals.

All the rest of the day he was haunted by a picture of a forlorn little auburn-haired boy in a prison, ceaselessly asking and looking for the mother who had left it for a narrower. And now he who had been that little boy was once more a captive, and once more robbed of the most precious thing he had.

But Laurent was a captive, too, and often found it far from amusing to be cooped up summer day after summer day, when history was being made and battles fought without him. For that, as he gathered from M. Perrelet, was precisely what was happening in Vendée, where, since mid-May, when the Marquis Louis de la Rochejaquelein had arrived from England and assumed the leadership, things had really been moving. And Brittany, L'Oiseleur's Brittany, where they were held fast, was full of activity too. Even if, as seemed likely, the decisive conflict would take place on the North-eastern frontier, it was very bitter to be debarred from playing any part in this local struggle which, after all, was occupying many thousands of troops which Napoleon could well have utilised elsewhere for that great decision.

—But not so bitter for him, Laurent recognised, as for his fellow-captive. At times, for Aymar's sake, he really dreaded M. Perrelet's jovial, "Well, so your brigands have taken

Redon!" or, "I hear that your general-in-chief is in straits for want of ammunition," since both good and bad tidings had almost equal power to stab the leader whose men had already been so uselessly sacrificed.

(6)

On June 9th, more than five weeks after he had been brought to the château, Aymar was at last allowed to leave his bed, and sat in an arm-chair looking, so Laurent privately thought, ten times as gaunt and hollow-eyed as he had done between the sheets. Indeed, his quite natural state of weakness was a considerable disappointment to L'Oiseleur, as well as to his nurse, since at first his legs would not support him for an instant. However, on the second day he managed to walk round the room between M. Perrelet and Laurent, and shortly afterwards was clad in a suit of clothes belonging to the absent owner of Arbelles, for every garment of his own, except his boots, had had to be destroyed. Though this did not fit him, in cut and texture it was well enough, and to Laurent it was a great thing to see his charge clothed. He cherished visions of taking him before long for a walk on the terrace.

But on the whole L'Oiseleur was even more depressed than he had been while in bed, and Laurent wondered whether this was due to the disappointment of finding himself so unexpectedly weak. He had hoped that his friend was getting the better of these periods of gloom, and now the haunted look was more apparent than ever.

"I wish to goodness that he would tell me the whole story and have done with it!" he thought, almost in despair, after a few days of this, as he went down one afternoon for his constitutional. "He half promised that he would, some day; it would be so much better if he talked about it instead of eternally brooding over it. Two heads might perhaps see a way out."

Personal matters apart, Laurent himself had really more cause for depression at that moment than La Rocheterie. For only this morning had M. Perrelet brought them the news of the death of the Marquis de la Rochejaquelein in a skirmish—a calamitous loss to the Vendean Royalists. It had indeed greatly shocked the late Vendean aide-de-camp. On the other hand the good doctor reported a victory of Sol de Grisolles, the Breton general-in-chief, on June 10th, which had opened for

him the way to the sea, and to the reception of much-needed arms from England. But this had not cheered L'Oiseleur.

Rigault and another young officer were already strolling on the terrace when his guard deposited Laurent there. The former hailed him; the latter he had met once or twice, and the three took a turn up and down together.

"Pleasant weather," remarked Rigault. "I'm glad, Monsieur de Courtomer, that you get at least this taste of it. He's a very thoughtful old boy, the Sieur Perrelet.—By the way, I hear that Saint Sebastian is out of bed at last."

Laurent stopped dead and looked him in the face. "I don't know to whom you are referring, Monsieur!" he said sharply. But the red which had mounted to his cheek showed that he had at any rate a very good idea.

"No offence!" said Rigault lightly. "The name is not of my originating."

"Though, parbleu, it is, from all accounts, strikingly appropriate," murmured the other officer.

"It is in strikingly bad taste!" retorted Laurent, turning upon him. And as the culprit did not appear penitent, but had a subdued grin on his face, he added, "I did not come out here to listen to offensive conversation," and began to move haughtily away. But Rigault came after him.

"It is I who ought to apologise, Monsieur de Courtomer," he said hastily. "I do apologise, sincerely. It slipped out without my meaning it."

Laurent writhed. Evidently the officers of the garrison were in the habit of referring to Aymar by this title; and it was, horribly, appropriate. Therein lay its offensiveness. The other officer made a half-laughing apology, too, and saluting, went off. Laurent looked after him, frowning.

"I must say you are a staunch champion," came Rigault's voice in his ear. "Please don't think I am insincere when I say that I admire you for it! Really, I hope I should be the same in your place. Saint Se—La Rocheterie is your friend, and if a man does not believe his friend when he assures him that he is innocent, well . . ."

But Lieutenant Rigault's magnanimous attempt to take another's point of view fell disappointingly flat. For Laurent, biting his lip, was now frowning at the gravel of the terrace. It was an odd moment for the thought to strike him for the first time in all these weeks, that that was exactly what his friend had never done. Aymar never had assured him, in so many words, that he was innocent.

He shook off the impression in a moment—for why should Aymar have told him a thing of which, as he knew, Laurent was already convinced? And when he returned to their joint apartment he had forgotten it.

Aymar, lying back in his arm-chair by the window, doing nothing, exactly as he had left him, appeared so averse to conversation that Laurent gave up the attempt, and took up instead *The Vicar of Wakefield*, which he himself was re-reading at odd moments, for the English lessons had soon been discontinued. It had not taken Laurent long to find out that his pupil's interest in them was only simulated—probably for his sake.

The innocent and amiable volume now opened of itself at the beginning of Chapter XXII, and Laurent found himself reading these words in large type, 'NONE BUT THE GUILTY CAN BE LONG AND COMPLETELY MISERABLE.'

They were only one of Goldsmith's sententious chapter-headings, but they might have been the inscription on Belshazzar's palace wall. Laurent was suddenly mesmerised, and remained staring at them. . . . He did not ask whether what they stated was axiomatically true; it was only that it fitted in so diabolically with—well, with all the profound depression of the last few days, with the whole attitude, even, of that silent figure now leaning its head on its nerveless hand, not even looking out of the window at the allurements of June. . . . And the page cast up at him further accusing scraps:—'*grief seemed formed for continuing . . . anxiety had taken strong possession . . . nothing gave her ease . . . in company she dreaded contempt, in solitude she only found anxiety. . . .*'

—'Long and completely miserable . . . none but the guilty . . . ' Good God, what was he thinking! Hot and cold by turns Laurent flung *The Vicar of Wakefield* violently on his bed. His action had at least the result of rousing Aymar, for it made him jump.

(7)

Next day, when Laurent came back from the terrace, he walked into an empty room. Aymar was not there.

One pang of wild dismay and, turning quickly, he inserted his foot into the closing door. "Where is M. de la Rocheterie?" he demanded fiercely of the sentry.

"A guard came and took him downstairs about half an hour ago," replied the man. "I must shut this door, sir."

"Took him downstairs!" ejaculated Laurent. "*Downstairs!* In Heaven's name, why?"

"The Colonel is back, and wished to see him—some kind of a council, I think. I shall get into trouble, sir, if you don't allow me——"

"I have a good mind to go down after him," declared Laurent, the light of combat coming into his eyes. "—No, all right," he added, as the empty-handed sentry thereupon made a grab for his musket. And he turned away.

Guitton back—and sending for L'Oiseleur! What could it mean? The cipher business again? No, that was all over. Oh, damn that scoundrel, why did he come back—why did he not die of that ball in his leg? And, as to making Aymar go downstairs in his present condition, when he had never done more than walk a little about this room—well, they would certainly have to carry him up again. It would set him back for ages, and M. Perrelet was away for a couple of days too.

Thus Laurent fumed. But Aymar was not carried back, though when at last he came in he looked scarcely able to stand, and leant against the door for a moment with closed eyes, clutching the handle. Laurent, thinking he was going to fall, hurried to him.

"Aymar——" he began, putting out an arm.

But Aymar brushed aside his proffered assistance with small courtesy, and, staggering past him to his own bed, sat down, gripping the edge of it with both hands. Laurent took one glance at him and poured out brandy.

"Those stairs!" he muttered furiously. "Madness . . . Drink this, and lie down quickly."

But Aymar did not seem to see the glass he held out. He was staring in front of him with eyes like live coals, his breath coming very fast; and in a moment Laurent realised that, as well as being physically spent, he was quivering with rage.

"You must take this, Aymar," he repeated.

The eyes blazed at him then. "You are becoming a veritable old woman, de Courtomer! There are times when one would really prefer to be allowed to lie down and perish in peace." After which ungracious remark he took the brandy from the slightly stunned Laurent, drank it off impatiently, and, pulling himself completely on to the bed, subsided there.

Laurent went and looked out of the window, undeniably wounded, but telling himself that something extremely unpleasant had been taking place downstairs, and that a man on the border-line of endurance will sometimes strike out at the very person he would least desire to hurt, if that person be on the spot. Nor had he ever judged Aymar's to be a very patient nature. He stole a look at him now, and saw that he was lying face downwards. For the first time he realised what an affliction it must be never to have solitude in hours of strain. But as he could not take himself off he tried to bury himself in a book.

It might have been ten minutes later, or twenty, that Aymar suddenly turned over and raised himself on an elbow.

"I want to ask your pardon for the way I spoke to you just now, Laurent," he said, in a voice not quite free from constraint. "I hope you know that I did not mean it for an instant. I was . . . annoyed . . . but not, God knows, with you."

The blood seemed to come back to Laurent's heart again. "Of course I knew that you did not mean it," he replied cheerfully. "I saw that you were . . . annoyed . . ." And, longing to ask why, but not quite daring, he took refuge in a triviality. "Convalescents are allowed to be irritable. So, if it means that you are getting stronger, you are welcome to call me an old woman as much as you like."

Aymar struggled off the bed back to his sitting posture on the edge. "Did I really say that? I deserve to be——" He stopped abruptly, and a wave of red passed over his colourless face. It became still more sombre; he shut his mouth tight, and dragging himself to his feet went over to the window, stood a moment looking out, and then let himself fall into the big chair there.

"Laurent," he said presently, "as an excuse for my rudeness and ingratitude I will tell you why they had me down." But there was struggle in his voice, and with one hand he was twisting a tassel of the chair. "It was the same thing over again. Colonel Guitton asked me what I meant to do henceforward, since I could hope for no mercy from my own side. He was therefore kind enough to promise me a commission with his." And, as Laurent made an angry exclamation, he went on, "But that is nothing new. Have you forgotten his visit here that day? Only this time it was much more public"—he caught his breath for a second—

"and this time he did not, I think, really expect me to accept. . . . Then they went through my few papers at great length, and questioned me about them. That's all. Don't ask me any more about it."

He put his head back in the chair; his arms fell to his sides. Laurent, kneeling by him, carried away on far too deep a tide of anger and pity to remember his own recent repulse, began to chafe the cold hands, cursing under his breath the man who had devised so public an indignity.

For a moment Aymar roused himself.

"Coals of fire," he said, looking at him with a world of expression in his tragic eyes. "Yes, as Guitton announced just now, shooting *is* too good for me!"

(8)

They were nearer to each other that evening than they had ever been before. Afterwards, Laurent thought that had Aymar not been so spent in body and so quivering in soul he would probably have told him his secret. As it was, he lay silent on his bed and watched the sky through the window, and Laurent watched him, and had a kind of happiness from it.

But at the same time he was deeply uneasy. What would that devil do next, now that he was back? He had not waited long to strike. But, short of imprisoning them in different rooms—a most distasteful possibility—the young man did not see what he could do.

It was about two o'clock next afternoon, a little before the time when Laurent usually took his walk on the terrace, that steps outside the door roused him from the book he was reading.

"My escort," he said with a yawn. "The fellows are early."

But there entered instead—Colonel Guitton.

Laurent's heart descended to his boots. Aymar immediately pulled himself out of his chair, and stood looking out of the window.

"Good afternoon, Monsieur de Courtomer," said the Bonapartist, taking on his side no notice of L'Oiseleur. "A pleasant day, is it not?" He came forward into the room, limping a little, as Laurent was delighted to see. "You have not yet gone out for your constitutional, then? It was really

à propos of that that I came—to suggest that you should, if you wished, have liberty to extend it.”

“You are very kind, Monsieur le Colonel,” murmured Laurent, taken aback.

“In fact I have been reflecting that it would perhaps be more agreeable for you to become a prisoner on parole altogether now.”

“But why should I suddenly become a prisoner on parole?”

“Because,” responded the Colonel, showing his teeth in his false smile, “you will henceforward be alone in captivity, and, as an alleviation, I thought——”

“Alone!” exclaimed Laurent, glancing at the figure against the window. He *did* mean to separate them, then!

“Yes,” said the Imperialist. “You are going to lose your patient to-day. I am afraid that we cannot keep him any longer.—Monsieur de la Rocheterie!”

Aymar was forced to turn round. He wore an icy and disdainful face.

“Here, Monsieur,” said the Colonel, advancing to the table, “are most of the papers and all the money and other effects found on you after . . . after your unfortunate experience in the Bois des Fauvettes. We had the pleasure of going through the former together yesterday. Here, in particular, is a letter which I am sure you will be very glad to recover. There is now nothing to keep you longer from the fair writer—unless, of course, she has rather stricter views on honour than yours!” And, with his eyes on him, he laid a purse, a leather case, and a stained letter on the table.

Aymar had not moved from the window. But at the last words Laurent saw his hands shut themselves with a jerk. After a very tense second he demanded curtly: “Why are you giving me back those things?”

“Because it is usual to return his effects to a liberated prisoner—and you are free, Monsieur de la Rocheterie.”

“*Free!*” exclaimed L’Oiseleur, taking a step forward.

“Free!” echoed Laurent, not believing his ears.

“You are surprised, Monsieur de Courtomer,” enquired the Colonel suavely, turning to him. “But of what advantage can it be to us to house, feed, and give medical attendance to this gentleman any longer? After yesterday’s interview we have no choice but to ask him to seek lodging elsewhere. As it is highly improbable that he will find it among his own friends we do not run any risk in this step.—I regret,

Monsieur de la Rocheterie, that with these possessions I cannot return to you your sword. You had, I fancy, already been deprived of it before your . . . accident."

And at that Aymar strode forward to the table.

"If you were only a gentleman I would call you out for that!" he said, in a voice of intense and quiet fury; and he looked so dangerous that Laurent all but made a movement to intervene.

"Any gentleman would hold me absolved from accepting your challenge if you sent it," retorted the Bonapartist undisturbed. "I think you will realise that state of affairs when you are free, Monsieur le Vicomte!—Be ready, please, to leave this room in a quarter of an hour."

In the stunned silence brought about by his last words he turned as if to go, then, apparently remembering something, swung round again, and, putting his hand into his pocket, took out a small object.

"'The reward of martial valour,' if I mistake not," he said dryly, looking down at it and evidently reading off the phrase. Then he lifted his eyes to his released prisoner, and, taking the little object from the palm of one hand, held it out dangling from the finger and thumb of the other. Laurent then saw what it was—Aymar's Cross of St. Louis, held out to its owner in silence, but with a look and a smile which made a more hateful commentary than any words. Colonel Guitton, who had come in person to announce his decree, intended that L'Oiseleur should be made to receive his dishonoured decoration from him in person; and that, in fact, was what did happen, for after a moment or two of waiting Aymar was obliged to advance and take the order from the outstretched hand. And, having forced him to this, the Colonel turned away with a broadening of his contemptuous smile.

But Laurent managed to intercept him before he got to the door.

"Monsieur le Colonel," he protested, "you cannot do such an inhuman thing! It is unheard of! M. de la Rocheterie is only just out of a sick-bed where he has lain, as you know, in danger of his life—he can hardly stand . . . he is not fit to travel. It is little short of murder!"

The dragoon shrugged his shoulders. "That is not my business, Monsieur de Courtomer. We have returned him his money; it is open to him to procure further medical care. I do not think, however," he added with a sneer, "that he will go to the nearest Royalist headquarters for it; that might

lead him to a beech-tree again! Anyhow, Monsieur le Comte, I am sorry to deprive you of his society, as you seem to like it. So, if you care to give me your parole——”

“I’ll see you in hell first!” cried Laurent, exploding. And the force of his passion was such that he barely heard the Colonel, with a darkened and furious face, saying something, as he went out, about the place in which *he* would shortly find himself. . . .

And Aymar? Aymar had laid down the cross near his other little possessions, and with bowed head was supporting himself, close to the table, by the back of a chair. As soon as he heard the door close he dropped into the chair, put his elbows on the table, and covered his face. The next moment his hands slid, locked, from his face, and his head went down on his outstretched arms.

“Aymar,” said Laurent in an almost awe-struck voice, “he cannot mean this—it’s impossible!”

No answer—except that given by the objects lying on the table near the humiliated head. The obscurest soldier would have been too valuable to the other side to release, but L’Oiseleur was henceforth worthless; they could safely afford themselves the satisfaction of flinging him out. And the realisation of this had beaten him to his knees.

“It is impossible,” repeated Laurent, but with less assurance. “Did he—did he threaten this yesterday?”

The bronze head stirred, and then raised itself. But Aymar’s expression was dazed, and after staring at him a moment he dropped his face again on his arms.

A wave of fierce indignant pity surged over Laurent. Yes, that butcher and devil had knocked him out of time. Mercifully he could not witness his achievement. He knelt down and threw an arm across the bowed shoulders.

“Aymar,” he said desperately, “let us think what is to be done. There is not very long.”

But Aymar said in a choked voice: “I wonder you can bring yourself to touch me.”

As an answer to that Laurent put his arm closer about him. “Do you think I pay a moment’s heed to what that blackguard said? I have your secret. But, Aymar, the cost is too heavy!”

The locked hands twisted a moment. “The cost—my God!—the cost!” said the voice brokenly. Then L’Oiseleur lifted his head, his eyes fixed on the window. “You still think that of me? You will not think it much longer!”

"Am I so changeable?" asked Laurent gently. He possessed himself of a hand. "Yes, Aymar, the cost is too-heavy. It is more than one man ought to pay for another . . . it is not right. I do implore you to reconsider, now, and—clear yourself!"

There was no answer for a moment. L'Oiseleur's hand lay impassive in his. He put his other over his eyes. Then, between a gasp and a sigh, he said: "I cannot. I cannot clear myself."

Laurent set his teeth. His fingers closed on the faintly scarred wrist. "I have thought that sometimes," he answered. "You have got entangled in another's dishonour. Then, as I am a living man, that other shall clear you.—Tell me, who is this de Fresne who would not admit the truth?"

Aymar's hand dropped from his eyes. He looked at the speaker with haggard astonishment. "De Fresne—where did you hear his name?" And without giving him time to reply he went on: "Oh, my dear Laurent, you are on the wrong road! No, no; de Fresne was . . . the victim, not the culprit. The truth . . ." A little shudder went through him, and he withdrew his hand from Laurent's grasp. "I have no one but myself to thank for my situation—that is the truth. I ought to have told you everything before this . . . and now there is no time . . ." He took a deep breath. "How much longer? I must be ready."

"Only a few minutes more," faltered Laurent, glancing away to the clock.—*No one but myself to thank. . . .* If he would only give him the clue! . . . But this was not the moment. If in a few instants Aymar de la Rocheterie was to be thrust out from the shelter of a roof, some preparation must be made—but what preparation? He had nothing but the ill-fitting clothes he wore. And as to provisions, there were none in the room. Laurent sprang up from his knees.

"You must take my cloak. There is brandy in the flask, I think."

"Your cloak?" repeated Aymar tonelessly. "It is uniform—I cannot wear it." He pulled himself to his feet and stood looking down at his returned possessions. "What am I to do with these?" he said, as though to himself, touching them stupidly. But as he took up the letter a spasm of pain came over his face. "I know what I will do with this. . . . Have you a tinderbox there?"

Laurent gave him his. With hands whose shaking he tried vainly to control Aymar at last obtained a light, set fire to the stained letter, and held it flaming till it fell in flakes on the table, till his own hand was almost burned. And Laurent stood dumb before an agony of soul which he felt to be as consuming as the mounting flame that was so strange in the daylight . . . and before the immediate vision of his own great loss. In a few moments—unless it were a cruel jest of authority—his friend would be torn from him. It was quite possible that he should never see him again. . . . And in that second he took his resolve: if he got a bullet in him, if he broke his neck over it, he would leave the château d'Arbelles himself that night.

"Aymar," he said abruptly, "tell me quickly in what direction you will go, for I mean to follow you."

"Direction?" repeated Aymar, staring at the ashes of the letter. "Direction—I don't know. Just away somewhere—where they do not know me. . . . A firing-party would have been so much more merciful," he added to himself.

He slowly put his money and the wallet into one pocket, while Laurent, with smarting eyes, slipped the brandy-flask into the other. The cross, with the laurel-encircled sword uppermost, still lay on the table by the ashes of the letter, only a small piece of its red ribbon, oddly jagged and torn, still adhering to it. Aymar looked down at it.

"Perhaps you would rather not have any remembrance of me—a man who can be insulted with impunity," he said, his lip curling. "But, if you care to, will you take this?" And he suddenly held out the decoration to his companion.

Laurent was staggered. Aymar was too stunned, of course, to realise what he was doing. He caught him by the arm.

"No!" he cried fervently. "What, take what you won so gloriously, and will wear again as gloriously some day! Put it in your pocket, Aymar. I want no remembrance of you, for we shall not long be separated. I mean to escape from Arbelles to-night and follow you. But I must know in what direction you intend to go."

L'Oiseleur did mechanically put the order into a pocket, but to the question he shook his head. "Have you not heard that neither side will give me shelter?"

"For God's sake don't talk like that!" cried Laurent. "Do you not realise that in your state you cannot walk half a mile? Will you go to the inn in the village, and we can

arrange—— No, I have a better idea! Of course you will go to M. Perrelet—why did I not think of that before? Then you will be properly cared for. Aymar, go there at once: anyone will direct you to his house.”

But Aymar once more shook his head. “He is away. I would not ask such a favour of him if he were at home. I cannot install myself there in his absence.”

“Very well, then, the inn; and we must arrange quickly how I am to meet you when I escape——”

For the first time Aymar showed animation. “When you escape! My dear Laurent, you are much more likely to find yourself a prisoner in earnest to-night! That man will not forgive your outburst. Oh, Laurent, why did you do it?”

“For Heaven’s sake, listen, Aymar. Will you go to the village till I——”

“The village! To face the soldiers? Enough that I shall have to face them here . . . and now,” he added, as a heavy tread was audible along the corridor. They both listened for a second.

“It does not matter where I go,” went on Aymar. “You will never see me again, Laurent. So much the better. I would not have you touched with the shadow of my disgrace. . . . For what you have been to me I cannot even thank you.” He held out his hand rather blindly. “I have taken so much from you . . . and repaid it so ill. . . .”

There throbbed in the last words a veritable naked nerve of pain, more than Laurent could comprehend. All he knew was that he had enough pain of his own. . . . As the tread stopped, and voices were heard outside the door, he caught his friend by the shoulders. “I *shall* see you again—I shall find you! I am coming after you—to-night! This is only *au revoir*, L’Oiseleur!” And he kissed him on both cheeks.

“No, it is adieu,” replied Aymar, his hands on the hands that held him, as if to disengage himself. But all at once Laurent felt himself pulled closer, his friend’s, his hero’s head was down for a moment on his shoulder, and he heard, close to his ear, the whispered words, “Try to go on believing that I am not a traitor!”—farewell and appeal in one. Then the clasp loosened, and he himself turned to see four soldiers with fixed bayonets coming through the door. He was dully surprised; had they expected resistance?

Aymar drew himself up, and looked at them gravely.

The quiet personal dignity which it seemed impossible for him ever quite to lose shone out the more clearly as he braced himself to meet fresh humiliation—so clearly in fact that the escort, rather surprisingly, saluted him. But to Laurent the scene was horribly that of a man going out to execution. Had La Rocheterie's father, 'just my age when he was guillotined,' worn an air like that? But no one had thrown mud at *him!* . . . Aymar gave his friend an unforgettable look and held out his hand once more. "Adieu!" he said again. Laurent wrung the hand hard. "I shall follow!" he repeated, slowly and clearly, in English.

The next moment the door was locked again, the tramp of feet was dying away, and Laurent was alone—alone in the room which never yet, save for a short space yesterday, had he known destitute of Aymar's presence.

CHAPTER V

FREE—WITH A BROKEN WING

"I swear I will not ask your meaning in it:
I do believe yourself against yourself,
And will henceforward rather die than doubt."

TENNYSON, *Geraint and Enid*.

(I)

THE first moments of Laurent's grief were savage. He stood for some time at the window, his hands clenched together before him, his head against the grey panelling at the side, choking down the spasms of grief and fury which rose in his throat. He could not bear to look at the silent room. At last he stumbled over to Aymar's deserted bed and flung himself there face downwards. God only knew where Aymar would lie to-night!

But very soon his mind was plotting the details of his own escape. This window here by Aymar's bed, after dark, because it looked out round the corner, not on the façade; it would be quite easy. If he could only have elicited from L'Oiseleur where he intended to go! But Aymar seemed to have no plan—how could he? The fiat had been to them both like an unforeseen sentence of death.

Laurent stirred and gripped the pillow—Aymar's pillow—where his face was buried. The remembrance of the offer of Aymar's cross—a death-bed action—was not comforting. That Aymar could attempt such a thing showed—what did it show? Laurent clutched the pillow harder. For L'Oiseleur had at last definitely confessed that he could not clear himself. Did he then know himself to be irretrievably ruined over this black business, in which, after all, that shadowy de Fresne had not played the villain? And could it be that in consequence he contemplated taking his own life? Was that why he had tried to bestow on his friend that significant gift, and was that why he had said: "You will never see me again?"

Laurent sprang up and threw open the window by the bed. The sentry very rarely paced round this corner. If he did, there was a convenient bush almost under the window. And the prisoner had not wasted his opportunities for observation during his walks on the terrace, so that he knew roughly the extent and lie of M. d'Arbelles' domain, was aware that it was not hampered with walls, and had a very good idea at what points the sentries were posted. But there were hours yet to get through before dark. . . .

At about eight o'clock, as he was sitting in gloom and fever, watching the rain which had now come on, there unexpectedly entered to him Lieutenant Rigault. He looked concerned and somewhat shamefaced, but Laurent soon discovered that this embarrassment was not, as he at first supposed, on Aymar's account, but on his, Laurent's. The Colonel, it appeared, had given orders that one of the old dungeons which survived from the original château was to be prepared for M. de Courtomer's reception, but this retreat was in such a condition that it could not be ready till the morrow. Rigault feared, however, that this would be M. de Courtomer's last night in his present quarters.

Laurent (who was privately of the same opinion) while thanking him for the interest he took in his fate, intimated that he considered no dungeon was deep enough for Colonel Guitton to expiate the turning out of a wounded prisoner, scarcely able to stand, to die, perhaps, of exposure. But the young chasseur, while admitting that this had seemed to him rather inhuman, asked whether Laurent, in their place, would be disposed to condone treachery by making much of a traitor.

"Making much of!" exclaimed Laurent contemptuously. "You haven't run much risk of that at Arbelles, have you? What about yesterday's proceedings?—Were you there?"

"We all were; we had to be—orders. But do not go away with the idea, pray, Monsieur de Courtomer"—as Monsieur de Courtomer bent upon him a very pregnant look—"that the Colonel had it all his own way at that interview! There is not much of the Early Christian martyr about the modern St. Sebas—I beg your pardon! He said some pretty stinging things himself."

"He could hardly say anything stinging enough in reply to that suggestion that he should accept a commission with you!"

"Oh, he simply said he would rather die than do that. It was not very judicious," commented Rigault reflectively,

"because then the Colonel was able to retort, 'I dare say you would rather like me to have you shot, since you think, no doubt, that the balls of an enemy firing-party would efface the marks of your own. I should never do *that*; a soldier's death is too good for you.' And," finished the young officer, as Laurent flushed hotly, "if the facts are as Colonel Richard reported them, I quite agree with that opinion."

"If you talked till next year, Monsieur," retorted Laurent scornfully and impolitely, "you would not get me to believe that it is Colonel Guitton's excessive high-mindedness which has led him to do what he has done to-day! He has never forgiven M. de la Rocheterie for baulking him over du Tremblay's plans. There is personal vengeance behind his abominable action."

"Yes," said Rigault thoughtfully, "I believe you are right. It is not so much what La Rocheterie has done, as what he refused to do. . . . But, with regard to his turning out, he had his money, you know, Monsieur de Courtomer. He could have gone to the village inn, if he had chosen, instead of starting off to nowhere along the Saint-Caradec road."

Laurent became very attentive. "He went along the Saint-Caradec road?"

"Yes. He turned to the right at the château gates."

"You are sure of that? Naturally I am interested to know where he has gone."

"Naturally. Yes, I know he did. The fact is," said Lieutenant Rigault, looking out of the window, "that I happened to be in the avenue at the time—by pure chance, I assure you; I was not there as a spectator of . . . misfortune. Well, when La Rocheterie got to the gates—he had no escort then—the sentry would not let him pass; evidently he had no orders to that effect. I foresaw that he might be turned back, and have to come up the avenue again, and that would have been cruel. So I hurried down and told the sentry that he was released; and I saw therefore that he turned along the Saint-Caradec road."

At that absence of explicit orders—intentional, he felt sure—Laurent had ground his teeth. And how many *had* been in the avenue to watch him? "I wonder he ever reached the gates at all," he muttered savagely. "Did he look very much exhausted?"

"I must confess that I would not have backed him to go much further," admitted the young Imperialist. "Indeed I think he was holding on to the gate when I got there, but

when he saw me he stood up straight and thanked me very civilly." He paused a moment, and then added, it seemed against his will: "I admit that I am puzzled by him. I cannot square what he has done with . . . what he seems to be."

But Laurent was not so elated by this confession as he might have been in earlier days. What did it matter now? He said nothing, and Rigault went on: "I watched him to the bend—about a furlong it is—he was walking very slowly, but fairly steadily."

"What is along that road?" enquired Laurent in a gloomy and exasperated voice.

"Nothing till you come to Saint-Caradec. It is not a high road, properly speaking, but the country people sometimes use it. La Rocheterie might get a lift in a farmer's cart."

"And if not?"

"I don't know," replied the other, also rather gloomily. He gave a short sigh. "I wish it had not happened. . . . As to the Colonel's intentions with regard to you, we are going to raise a strong protest directly there is a chance of being listened to, so we must hope for the best."

To this evidence of good feeling Laurent made no response whatever; he was with Aymar in the rain, on the road that led to nowhere. Rigault went to the door. And when Laurent, staring forlornly through the blurred window, said to himself: "If only I knew where he was!" he had really forgotten the Imperialist's presence.

He was reminded of it by a touch on the shoulder. The young officer had recrossed the space between them. And he now remarked to the prisoner in a rather strange and hurried voice: "The windows of this room are only sixteen feet from the ground."

"I calculated that they would be about that," returned M. de Courtomer. And then, suddenly realising what a surprising thing had just taken place, he turned and stared at the speaker. Lieutenant Rigault of the garrison of Arbelles got noticeably red, somehow found the captive's hand, gulped out very low "Good luck!" and bolted for the door.

(2)

Many times during the last few weeks had Laurent told himself how easy it would be to escape from captivity if he

were ever to cast his thoughts that way. Yet, in the event, the simplicity of his departure rather staggered him; for, twenty minutes after he had clung bat-like to the sill of the window by which Vert-Vert also had left the château, he was outside the domain of M. le Baron d'Arbelles altogether, and was creeping, with looks to right and left, along the dim pallor of the Saint-Caradec road.

He had encountered no obstacles of any kind whatever, and only a minute or so of suspense, while the sentry stood meditating on the other side of the bush which momentarily concealed the acrobat after his drop. It was a dark night, which would have been auspicious for an ordinary fugitive, but was not so fortunate for a fugitive who was searching for someone else. However, Aymar must be somewhere along this road (always supposing that he had not got a lift) because he would never have had the strength to climb its high banks even if he wished to leave it.

But soon, a little to Laurent's dismay, the bank and hedge on his left broke into what seemed to be a thicket of some extent. Instantly he felt sure that Aymar had turned in there, and that he should find him. He went in. But under the trees it was so dark that he began to stumble. He listened, but only heard gently running water; he called very softly but without result. He dared not go on for fear L'Oiseleur should be there after all, asleep or unconscious; yet he could not search the thicket thoroughly until it grew lighter. So, feeling, unreasonably enough, that he was somehow betraying his quest, he lay down in a dry ditch and presently swam off into an uncomfortable slumber.

But before the first thrush began he had hunted through every foot of the coppice. L'Oiseleur was not there—not a trace of him. All these hours then had been wasted; while Aymar—in what plight was he by now? The night had not been warm.

Horribly disappointed and anxious, Laurent stood on the side of the thicket farthest from Arbelles and surveyed the prospect. The tiny wood gave on to rolling country, fields of large extent. He could not free himself from the conviction that Aymar had been in the wood at some time, if only to rest. By which way would he have left it in that case—by the fields or by the road? It seemed to Laurent that he must search both exits. He resolved that he would first cover a section of the road—the more hazardous proceeding for himself—and then search the field back again to the copse.

After that it would become a choice between the next section of the road and the open country.

Looking to see that the coast was clear, he ran cautiously up the road, glancing to either side as he went. It was perfectly empty save for a meditative rabbit in the middle, who whisked off at his step; it gave, in fact, in the morning stillness, between its holly hedges, the impression of not being meant for human foot at all.

He clambered over a gate into the field, and was just setting his face once more for the thicket, when something about a haystack not far off caught his eye. Part of it had been sliced away, but not completely, so that there still remained, about two feet from the ground, a ledge rather wider than a man's body. And on this ledge a man was lying. . . .

Laurent stood stock-still, his heart thumping suffocatingly. The next moment he was at the refuge so nearly missed. Aymar was lying slightly curled up, his face towards the wall of hay, his head pillowed on his bent arm—as a tired boy might lie. Laurent stooped over him. Yes, thank God, he was breathing naturally—in fact, he seemed to be sound asleep.

But he looked deadly weary. Laurent touched his left hand, lying loosely on his breast; it was very cold. So he took off his own coat and spread it over him, and, reluctant to wake him yet, squatted down beside him on the grass, just out of his line of vision, and said to himself contentedly: "I knew I should find him!"

He had not been there, however, for more than five minutes or so when the sleeper stirred, sighed and woke; then, realising that there was a covering over him where covering had been none, raised himself on an elbow and gazed round in bewilderment.

"Good morning," observed Laurent, getting up and coming into view. "I have kept my word, you see. And I have brought you your breakfast." Voluntarily or involuntarily, he had adopted a thoroughly British method of cloaking his feelings. Aymar gave an exclamation and, falling back against the hay, stared as if he hardly knew him. At last, rather weakly, he began to laugh.

"I told you I should do it," said Laurent cheerfully, very much pleased with the success of his little coup de théâtre. But on that he suddenly found himself deprived of further speech. He went down on his knees by the ledge of hay and

mutely embraced him, French fashion; after which he began to fumble in his pocket for the provisions he had brought—the major part of his own supper.

“... How did you do it, Laurent—how did you do it?” Aymar was asking incredulously.

“I climbed out of the window,” responded the adventurer briefly. “—Have you had *anything* to eat since you left yesterday?”

“I was not hungry. I had the brandy, you know.”

“Heavens above, you must be starving! Eat this quickly. No, first—Is the eau-de-vie in this pocket?”

“Always that brandy-flask,” commented Aymar, trying to smile, as, supporting himself on an elbow, he took the little cup. But his hand shook so much that Laurent caught it from him with an exclamation, and, seating himself on the ledge, slipped an arm round his ex-patient and supported him while he held the cup to his lips. There was reawakened fury in his heart.

“This is like old times,” remarked L’Oiseleur, and lay still a moment against his friend’s shoulder.

“There’s only one alleviation,” muttered Laurent, with some of the fury audible in his voice, “and that is, that your release was undoubtedly vengeance on that scoundrel’s part. Viewed in that light, it is almost a compliment.”

“Oh, are you speaking of Guitton?” murmured Aymar. “I had forgotten him for the moment. I was thinking about someone better worth considering.” He caught at the hand that had held the cup, and pulled it to him. “I was convinced that I should never see you again, Laurent. . . . Shall I ever be able to repay you?”

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” said Laurent, as gruffly as any of his English forbears, but he returned the pressure of the two cold hands which held his. “Now eat; and when you have eaten you can tell me how you found the strength to get so far.”

So Aymar ate, when Laurent had consented to do the same, and told him. It appeared that he *had* gone into the copse, and been there for hours, perhaps—he did not seem sure. Nor was he, evidently, quite clear whether he had lost consciousness there or not; but he admitted that he had thought, ‘quite erroneously,’ that he could not possibly go further. . . . However, towards evening he made another effort, drank some water, and went on by the field way, rather blindly, his only object being to put as much distance between

himself and Arbelles as he could. In the twilight he almost stumbled into the haystack, and having thus fortunately come on it, subsided there.

"Well, thank God for the haystack," observed Laurent. "Were you cold in the night? It's horribly open here."

"I am never very warm now," said Aymar simply. "Yes, it is open. And that is why, mon ami, you have stayed here long enough. It is high time you went on, for if they have not discovered your absence already——"

But Laurent exclaimed, as the speaker had once incautiously done to Guitton: "For what do you take me?" And he continued with warmth: "Why do you suppose I was at the trouble of wriggling out of that window? Directly you feel able we will go on (though I shall not be missed till breakfast-time) and, as you know the district a little, perhaps you can think of a suitable place to make for. Was there not some woman from your part of the country? . . . No, Aymar, really it is no use arguing—it only wastes time. Remember that I have English blood in me, and that it is quite as obstinate as your Norse. I only give in to you when I am in awe of you—which at this moment I am not."

So Aymar himself surrendered, and they started, he on Laurent's arm, across the great field towards another little wood, both as affording cover and as being in the direction of the farm of La Baussaine, where lived this woman from Sessignes who had known Aymar all his life, and had married and settled and achieved widowhood in this region. Provided, said Aymar, that her elder son, a soldier of the Imperial Guard, were not at home—which in existing circumstances was practically impossible—she would be only too glad to give them shelter.

In the little wood Laurent made his companion sit down and rest, for even the short sustained exertion had rendered him very breathless. Indeed, to progress thus, in stages, was the only possible method. Even so, after about an hour, the proceeding was making nearly intolerable demands on his little stock of strength. The stages began to get shorter, the rests longer. Twice there were gates to climb, once a hedge to push through, once retirement into a ditch was thought prudent to avoid a herdsman. And when they came forth from this retreat they had still, Aymar calculated, a good mile and a half to go; on hearing which, and surveying the speaker, Laurent wondered rather despairingly whether they would not have to try to find a nearer refuge.

A large, uncompromising drop of rain on his nose startled him at that moment, and he looked up. Was it possible—a thunderstorm on a morning like this? However, one could not argue about its unfitness; the point was to prevent Aymar from being instantly soaked to the skin. In the middle of the open pasture which they were skirting he espied a long, low object that looked like the shelter over a sheep-trough, save that, fortunately, there was no trough beneath it now.

"Quick, Aymar!" he exclaimed, almost dragging him along. They had to crawl in on hands and knees, but once inside it was just possible for Laurent, at all events, to sit upright. Aymar lay down at full length, his head on his friend's knee, and shut his eyes. And then the rain descended.

"Talking about rain," observed Laurent suddenly, "how wet did you get yesterday?"

"I don't know," replied Aymar. "I did not trouble about it. You talk as if I were a girl, my dear Laurent. Do you suppose I have not slept scores of times in the open before—and in the rain, too? I am a Chouan . . . that is to say, I was," he added in a lower tone, and fell silent.

"I wonder if a thunderstorm ever came à propos," he remarked a few moments later to the accompaniment of the first peal, and shivered suddenly.

Laurent looked down at him rather unhappily. "I am afraid you must be horribly tired, and the devil knows how long this storm is going on. I wish we had something left to eat."

But Aymar answered, without opening his eyes, in a voice gone suddenly remote and drowsy, "I am neither tired nor hungry—a little cold, that is all. I think I am going to sleep."

Perhaps that was the best thing that could happen to him, and if it did, Laurent saw some chance of slipping off his own coat and wrapping it round him. But he had had little sleep himself that night, and, lulled by the downpour on the shingled roof, he half dozed off as he sat there. He was recalled by a violent shiver running through the shoulders resting against his knees.

"That letter," said their owner reflectively. "That letter . . . I am glad I burnt it. It was the only way to cleanse it. It had been in *his* horrible hands all this while." Here he shivered again, but went on almost immediately, his eyes fixed on some point out in the rainy landscape, "Yes, he had it all the time, and never guessed. And down-

stairs, for all his questioning . . . I could hardly bear it . . . he never found out.”

“That was fortunate,” murmured Laurent vaguely, uncertain whether Aymar were speaking to himself, or expecting a reply. But speculation gave way to alarm the next moment, when a third shudder drove through L’Oiseleur’s body, and his teeth clicked together.

“Mon ami, what is the matter with you? Are you so cold as that? Come up closer to me. Confound this rain!” And he edged himself nearer, till he could get his companion into his arms. Aymar’s hands were as cold as ice, but there was a faint flush on either cheek.

“I saw the Colonel looking at my wrists once,” he began again, with a complete absence of his usual extreme reserve. “He said . . . he said it was not *there* that he should like to put a rope. . . .” The narrator gave a sort of laugh. “It was round here!” He carried his hand to his throat, and a double flicker of lightning ran through the shelter as though to emphasise this disclosure.

“Damn him!” exclaimed Laurent passionately, while the long roll reverberated overhead.

“I suppose he might have done it if he had chosen,” proceeded Aymar, with the same uncanny fluency. “We could not either of us have prevented him, could we, Laurent? They laughed, some of them. . . . I did want very much to stand all the time . . . but I was not able to. I had to sit down. And I did not mean to lose my temper, but I did—once—and it only made it worse for me, because——” But his teeth were now chattering so that he could get no further.

“Oh, *don’t* try to talk!” cried Laurent. “And why, in God’s name, are you shivering like this?”

For his brief experience of nursing had been mainly surgical, and he had never imagined that shivering was other than a semi-voluntary action. But Aymar’s whole body was beginning to be convulsed every few seconds by a sort of galvanic shock, and his teeth were now going like castanets, to the complete exclusion of any more confidences. Laurent, really frightened, stripped off his own coat and wrapped it round him, attempted to pour brandy between the chattering teeth, most of it being spilled in the process, and held him as closely as he could to the warmth of his own body.

Gradually the fit passed, but it had so exhausted its already spent victim that he lay in Laurent’s hold inert, with closed eyes. Whether this seizure were due to last night’s

exposure or no, it was clear to the perplexed Laurent that Aymar was going to be ill—was ill already, or he would never have volunteered those revelations—and they were nothing like in safety yet. For all the splendid suppleness that had once been his, L'Oiseleur, lying across his knees like this, seemed uncommonly heavy; he knew that he could not carry him more than a few yards.

A ray of sunshine suddenly struck on to the head on his arm. The living bronze glowed (as once in the detested cart) and, looking up, Laurent realised that the storm was over. But of what use was that now? However, he must do his best.

"Aymar," he said, stooping to his ear, "it has stopped raining, and we must go on. Can you hear me?"

"Yes," answered Aymar—and actually began to struggle up. "Yes—I'll try . . ."

(3)

"And so M. Perrelet, back at Arbelles, is the nearest doctor?" repeated Laurent thoughtfully, looking at Mme Allard.

Madeleine Allard was forty-nine years of age and still comely. She had lost her husband, but she had at La Baussaine six cows, ten pigs, fifty-five hens and an idiot son. To her that afternoon as she was kneading bread had entered her afflicted offspring making signs that there were strangers approaching. Now one of these strangers—only to Madeleine he was no stranger at all—was ensconced in her absent son Jérôme's bed, and the other was standing in her kitchen making enquiries about medical aid, which would certainly have to be procured somehow.

"Could you send for M. Perrelet then, Madame?" asked Laurent.

"I could send Jeannot with a letter, Monsieur—he could not take a message, poor boy. He is not as other boys. And, as villages frighten him, he would probably deliver the letter at the wrong house, or perhaps not at all. Yet certainly M. le Vicomte must have a doctor, and as soon as possible.—Could you not go for M. Perrelet yourself, Monsieur?"

"Yes, of course, I *could*," said Laurent reflectively. There did seem something ironical in the prospect of abandoning his friend, whom he had escaped to find, and risking, for his sake, the experience of a much more rigorous captivity. He

would probably never succeed in reaching the village, for the whole garrison of Arbelles must be on the alert about him; still, even if he were retaken, he could doubtless contrive to get a message to the surgeon (who was to return, he knew, that evening). "Yes," he resumed, "I will go directly it is dusk—if M. de la Rocheterie is not better."

Mme Allard intimated that in her opinion there was small hope of that. Aymar's condition had deeply shocked her. To Laurent, indeed, it was still something of a mystery how he had succeeded in transporting him from the sheep-shelter to La Baussaine, seeing that no real reliance could be placed on his legs, and less and less on the directing brain. And the effort had tired Laurent himself more than a little, as Mme Allard for all her preoccupation now observed, and she begged him to eat and sleep; should the soldiers come she could very quickly hide him under the cider-press . . . but where to conceal M. le Vicomte, ill as he was, she did not know. So, for Aymar's own sake, Laurent had to tell her, to her bewilderment, that the Bonapartists would not search for him, since they had released him themselves.

The light was failing when, some hours later, he went down the three steps into the low-ceilinged bedroom on the ground floor to take his final resolution; for though he would go unhesitatingly, he still hoped that he would not have to go. But Mme Allard, who was sitting there, shook her head, and Aymar, sunk in the big, billowing farmhouse bed, now seemed very drowsy and confused; his hands were as hot as they had previously been cold, and his breathing sounded quick and shallow. And when Laurent tried to feel his pulse he said dreamily: "You will find that much more convenient, Monsieur, when the bandages are off." . . . No; Aymar must undoubtedly have M. Perrelet's care, and he himself, if necessary, pay the very unpleasant price of obtaining it. He dared not take an articulate farewell of him, lest his intention should be divined. "Good-bye, Aymar," he said within himself, and went sadly from the room.

Then he was furnished by Mme Allard, who had followed him, with an unattractive blue blouse and a sort of rough cape smelling horribly of the farmyard, and an old hat, and directions for his five-mile journey to Arbelles, to be taken, for greater safety, across country. And, looking down at himself, the Comte de Courtomer thought what a pity it was that the only patois with which he could sustain the character which he represented was broad Devonshire.

He regretted this still more when, between ten and eleven, he stood under the smoky oil-lamp opposite M. Perrelet's door in the main street of Arbelles village, where every house, including the surgeon's, seemed to be wrapped in the blankest of slumbers. He had had an eventless journey, so far as human kind were concerned, though the darkness had betrayed him pretty deeply into a stagnant ditch between two fields. By carefully avoiding the neighbourhood of the château he appeared very successfully to have avoided any of its garrison; but now a series of modest taps on M. Perrelet's front door—and he dared not attempt a more sonorous summons—had failed to bring anyone. If he could not get admitted to have private speech with the doctor his position was rather precarious, for any public parley was highly undesirable. But that must be risked; as must, also, the chance of that discreetly curtained window not being that of M. Perrelet's bedchamber after all.

Laurent withdrew from his pocket a handful of small stones collected en route for just such an emergency, and launched them upwards. They tinkled against the glass and fell back baffled on to the cobbles. Twice he did it. Then the curtains were violently wrenched asunder, and between them appeared a stout white form. In another moment the sash went smartly up.

No miracle-working saint could have been more rapturously greeted by a suppliant than was that nightcapped head by the young man in the street below. But he dared not proclaim his rapture.

"Who is it?" asked the head shortly.

"You are wanted, Monsieur Perrelet," responded Laurent in a cautious tone.

"That's no answer," snapped the surgeon. "I'm always being wanted. But I've got to be wanted to some purpose to-night. Are you from Mme Lambert?"

"No, from Mme Allard. It's a very urgent case," pleaded Laurent. "If you would only come down——"

"Mme Allard! Why, she's fifty, and a widow!" objected M. Perrelet. "Stay, is it that cousin of hers I promised to attend? You are sure it is not a false alarm?"

"Oh no!" replied Laurent earnestly. "It's . . . an old patient of yours. If you will only come down I will explain. He's been having the most horrible shivering fits, and now——"

"*He!*" fairly bellowed M. Perrelet from the window.

"He! why did you not say at once that it was a man? For nothing but a confinement will I stir from this house to-night! Go away, wretched bucolic!" And he started furiously to draw down the window.

Now Laurent was indeed desperate. Having no stave that he might uplift, and fearing to hit M. Perrelet if he threw a stone, he swirled off the cloak that he wore and sent it flying window-wards. A good deal of its unsavoury bulk caught in the descending sash and stayed its progress. The window went up again with even more passion than had propelled its descent.

"What is this filthy object you have thrown up?" demanded M. Perrelet in a fury. "Pah! it stinks! I shall be infected with I know not what!" And he threw the offensive garment down again with all his force at its wearer.

But Laurent, still afraid to pronounce either his or Aymar's name, was now trying a different and more hazardous method of self-revelation. He stepped back across the narrow street and came under the light of the lamp on the other side, where, snatching off his hat, he exposed his features to its rays, M. Perrelet, and anyone else whom the altercation might have drawn to their windows. And at the sight of this young man in a blouse, holding his hat rigidly at arm's length and pointing to his own face with the other hand, all M. Perrelet's powers of speech (fortunately) deserted him for the moment. He disappeared from the window without even shutting it, which Laurent took for a hopeful sign. Darting across to the door, he was standing just outside when it opened to reveal the doctor, now clad in a dressing-gown and with a candle in his hand.

He waved the intruder into the nearest room and then said in a resigned manner: "Now, perhaps, you will be good enough to explain, Monsieur de Courtomer, why you are serenading me. I presume you are on parole. It appears to be a masquerade as well . . . pfui! that garment again!" And holding his nose he added: "I will gladly contribute some bergamot to your costume."

"You can't object to it, sir, as much as I do, who have had its company for five miles," protested Laurent. "But let me discharge my errand, and then I will leave you at once, or I may get you into trouble. You obviously don't know that I escaped last night from the château!"

"The deuce you did! Why this curious fancy for Arbelles then, and this flattering midnight visit to my door?

Ah, I forgot; you said you wanted me for someone or other."

"I do," said Laurent significantly, "and I'll tell you why!"

Now M. de Courtomer had counted, during his trudge, on making some impression upon M. Perrelet with this recital, if ever he succeeded in penetrating to his presence. Nor was he disappointed; indeed he was satisfied—and even surprised—at the little doctor's language, and, considering what he himself felt on the subject of Colonel Guitton, his standard of requirement was not low. So angry in fact was M. Perrelet that he made short work of Laurent's half-reluctant request that, if he did not actually give him up, he should see no more of him. M. Perrelet insisted, on the contrary, on driving him back with him in his gig, into which the young man was now directed to put the mare, while her owner dressed. And very shortly the doctor and the escaped prisoner were driving comfortably away in the darkness.

Once past the château gates unchallenged (for the sentries knew this equipage well) Laurent remarked cheerfully that he should have liked a peep at the dungeon, of whose preparation he had already informed his companion.

"Humph," said M. Perrelet, "you would not have found it at all amusing, and it would probably have meant rheumatism for the rest of your days—no, that's wrong, for I should have had you out of it in a brace of shakes. But you don't seem to realise what a risk you are running for that young man. Not but what," he added, "there's something about him, even at his most difficult, that makes one want to do things for him."

"You once said that you felt something of the sort the first moment you saw him, I think," observed Laurent.

"So I did," assented the old doctor, "and he wasn't looking his best, either . . . lying there senseless on the floor of the hall, half-stripped, roughly bandaged, and very extensively bloodstained. Add to that your friend Rigault had thoughtfully thrown a bucket of water over him, in the hopes of bringing him round—young idiot! I said, 'Good God, what's all this?' for every officer in the garrison seemed to be standing round him; and the Colonel replied, 'It's the Royalist leader L'Oiseleur, who has just been brought in shot—dying, if not dead. But I want him saved, if you can possibly do it.' . . . I thought myself at first that it was hopeless . . . cold as ice he was to touch anywhere—

and then that damned pool of water. However, I got him wrapped up and had bricks heated, and while I worked at him they told me the story of how he had been found and what he had done—a shocking story, and one which at first I saw no reason to doubt. . . . But somehow, when I had his head on my arm, although as you know I'm so sentimentalist"—Laurent smiled in the darkness—"I found myself thinking, 'I never saw any man who looked less like doing what they say he has done!' . . . Yes, when he decided at last to come back to the world he was quitting, and his chest lifted a trifle, and I said to myself: 'Continue, my young man; you've had the habit of breathing for about five-and-twenty years, I suppose; just take it up again—it's quite easy!' . . . when that happened, I was ridiculously pleased, I admit . . . I little thought I should have it all to do over again within the week!"

They drove on in silence for a while, M. Perrelet having presumably just drained his powers of invective to the bottom over Guitton's latest brutality, and Laurent conscious that he himself could not produce anything new or better.

"Yes," resumed the old surgeon after a few minutes, "I've changed my mind. Perhaps you have converted me. I am convinced now that La Rocheterie is innocent, and that he knows who is guilty, and, though I think he is foolish, I cannot help admiring him for holding his tongue, because I can see what it has cost him.—You know, Monsieur de Courtomer," he added gravely, "there were times when I was a little afraid for his reason, especially when it turned out that his men did shoot him. But he may thank his stars for the activity of that cavalry patrol on the first of May."

"Cavalry patrol? . . . but it was not cavalry that found him, surely," returned Laurent absently; he was thinking of that desperate 'I cannot clear myself.'

"I know that. I mean the one that captured *you*, my boy!"

And on that they drove round a turn and straight into a patrol themselves . . . only it was infantry this time.

M. Perrelet acted with singular promptitude.

"Imbeciles! no, I am not to be stopped for any senseless questions! Sacrebleu! you know who I am—Dr. Perrelet from Arbelles, and I am off in a tearing hurry to the farm of La Clavière. What?—this is the boy who fetched me, of course! Let go the mare's head—she'll have me in the ditch! And every moment you delay me——"

A lantern flashed. "It's M. Perrelet all right," said a gruff voice. "Let go!" The surgeon slashed at the mare, who plunged, and the lantern light rocked past Laurent's face without revealing it. They were off again.

Laurent drew a long breath. "Monsieur Perrelet, you ought to be a general! I suppose this is the last place they would expect to find me. But if Guitton discovers——"

"Je m'en fiche de lui," observed the little doctor with great calm. "Now, I wonder if those gentry have been looking for you over at La Baussaine, and worrying that lad of mine—you're both of you nothing but lads to me. Short of that, it is better than anything one could have hoped for, that the place should be searched while you are out of it."

And when they got there, they found that this desirable thing had really come to pass. Laurent was rewarded, therefore, for having run into danger by being preserved from it. No, said Madeleine, they had not troubled much about M. le Vicomte; their business was not, they said, with the red-haired renegade, whatever they meant by that word—and anyhow M. Aymer's hair was not red! She thought that he was rather better the last hour or so; at any rate, he was quite sensible.

Aymer was, indeed, to Laurent's great relief, much more himself; he gave M. Perrelet his most charming smile as he stretched out a hot, dry hand and began to thank him for coming, a proceeding which the latter soon cut short.

"No—and M. de Courtomer doesn't want any thanks either! Be quiet, young man! Have you got a pain there when you breathe—or there? I thought so. Have you been coughing?—Monsieur de Courtomer, oblige me by going to bed! No; I will not have you here to-night; it is not necessary."

But the moment his back was turned L'Oiseleur beckoned.

"How could you do it, Laurent!" he whispered, seizing his hands. "I should never have consented if I had known. No man ever had a friend like you! . . . But I will not try to thank you; it has gone beyond thanks between you and me now!"

"Go to sleep, mon cher," said Laurent.

"I would, only . . . it's so odd, every now and then I am in the wood again . . . I can count the trees—nine beeches, and the may-tree, and——"

"What!" exclaimed M. Perrelet, turning round, "—still there? Be off at once!"

So Laurent threw himself on his bed and slept till nearly sunrise. Then, feeling suddenly wakeful, he thought he would see if M. Perrelet would let him relieve his vigil for a little.

In spite of the prohibition he crept downstairs to Aymar's door. He heard his voice, so he must be awake. He opened the door gently without knocking. Before he had time to get inside M. Perrelet was on him, and, driving him back into the passage, closed the door behind them both.

"What do you want?" he demanded quite fiercely. "I thought I told you I would not have you here!"

"I'm so sorry——" began Laurent meekly.

"Then don't come again!" snapped the doctor, and he went in as quickly as he had come out.

"And I was going to do him a good turn!" thought Laurent, as half ruefully, half thankfully he went back to bed.

(4)

When he came out of his room at seven o'clock Madeleine informed him, rather to his surprise, that M. Perrelet had gone, M. le Vicomte being much better, and, in fact, asleep at the moment. The doctor, however, had said that he would come again in the evening to see how he did.

So evidently this threatened illness had relaxed its grip. Laurent could not be too thankful. He stole into Aymar's room. His friend was better, and, like himself, he was free, and the sun was shining, and there was a bunch of stocks by the bed. . . . Of what use were these things to a man whose face wore, even in sleep, a look of such ineffable sadness? It struck Laurent to the heart, that look. The consolations which he had been adding up in his mind were too facile—even freedom. Yes, perhaps freedom most of all. What was Aymar, when he was well enough, going to do with his freedom, if he could not clear himself? He turned and went out of the room.

To distract himself he then set out in quest of a hiding-place that might have baffled the soldiers last night, and finally selected the roof of a large barn near the house, which was overhung by the branch of a huge walnut tree. No one who was not unusually agile could possibly have gained it by means of that branch, and, for that very reason, searchers were unlikely to imagine that a fugitive had gained it at all. But Laurent, with time heavy on his hands, tried the ascent, and found it feasible, if hazardous.

When, therefore, he sat in the afternoon with Aymar, somewhat languid but evidently much better, it amused him to find the invalid obsessed with the idea that the soldiers would return and make a more thorough search, and that Laurent ought therefore to find himself a refuge beforehand—one, moreover, which should if possible be unknown to Madeleine, so that she could deny the knowledge of his whereabouts. Laurent heard him out, and then told him that the refuge was already secured. "Perhaps I had better not tell you either what it is," he added, laughing, but Aymar insisted upon knowing.

"It sounds a most excellent, breakneck spot," he observed, "but, Laurent, it would be so much better if you did not wait to play the squirrel, but left me to-day. I am well looked after, and nobody will hunt for *me*! I do beseech you not to go on risking your liberty for me! You risked it too desperately yesterday, going back as you did into the very lion's mouth for my sake, since I am sure Guilton would have treated you abominably if he had got you into his hands again."

"Oh, he had made preparations before I left, in the best mediæval style, for doing that," replied Laurent lightly, and told him what they were. "Imagine to yourself anybody in this century 'languishing in a dungeon'! The very word strikes me as ludicrous!"

"But the fact would not be. And you knew that when you went back yesterday!"

"It made passing the château in M. Perrelet's gig all the more enjoyable."

"Laurent, to please me—don't stay here! Get back to Vendée!"

"But, my dear fellow," protested M. d'Autichamp's aide-de-camp, "I tried to do that once, and came to grief! I shall go by sea when I do go. But it would be foolish to attempt it till the hue and cry for me has died down a little—till the soldiers, for instance, have paid this second visit on which you seem to have set your heart.—Will you bet on it, by the way?"

"Englishman!" retorted Aymar, smiling; and lay silent for a little. Laurent sniffed the stocks by the bed and said, "I wonder when Père Perrelet will let you get up?"

"To-morrow, I hope. He ought to be pleased with me. But I did not see him this morning; he slipped away when I was asleep."

"A lamb this morning, then! He was quite fierce in the night. I came in about three o'clock—at least I tried to come in, but he would not let me. He almost used force to keep me out. You were having a conversation with him, I fancy."

Aymar, who was turning about in the bed, became suddenly rigid, leaning on one elbow.

"I, a conversation with him! . . . I never spoke in the night . . . I was too drowsy. I hardly knew he was there. I . . ."

He broke off, and Laurent was amazed to see a flood of colour mount up from his bare throat to the very roots of his hair. It was gone in a moment, however, and he dropped back on to his pillows and began to speak of something else; but Laurent could see that his attention was wandering, and, thinking that he was tiring him, he left him not long afterwards.

It was about six o'clock that he heard the wheels of M. Perrelet's gig and ran out. "He's much better, Doctor!"

M. Perrelet seemed in a great hurry. "I need not have come, then," he muttered as he got down. "Do you mind holding the mare, Monsieur de Courtomer; she's a little fresh." And he went into the farmhouse with hardly a glance at him.

Laurent did as he was desired for a minute or two, then he whistled to Jeannot and made him take his place. He wanted to hear M. Perrelet's jolly voice rallying his patient and saying that he had got him there under false pretences. But instead of that it was very quiet in Aymar's room, and the young man, seeing through the half-open door that the surgeon was listening to his patient's breathing, stayed silently outside.

"Yes, there is no trace of anything," he heard M. Perrelet say, in a voice singularly free from jollity. "You have been extremely lucky . . . I shall not need to come again. Have the wound in your shoulder dressed every third or fourth day for a little; the other dressings can come off now. You may get up the day after to-morrow. If you are going to stay on here for a while I will speak to the good woman about you."

"Have you dismissed M. de Courtomer then?" Laurent heard Aymar reply. "I have not succeeded in doing so."

"No, quite so," answered M. Perrelet in a very peculiar tone. "I am afraid he carries his fidelity too far."

Aymar's hand suddenly gripped the blanket.

"Tell me one thing," he said in a whisper which, nevertheless, Laurent heard well enough. "Was I . . . delirious . . . last night?"

"You had that—misfortune," replied the old surgeon, and stood looking down at him, his little gimlet eyes almost invisible under a frown. Then, as the young man in the bed flung his arm across his own eyes, M. Perrelet abruptly brushed away something—a fly perhaps—below his spectacles, and on that Laurent, very uncomfortable at having eavesdropped, came openly in.

"Ah, Monsieur de Courtomer," said the doctor, "I can leave my patient with every confidence in your hands now, for the time that you are here. He will not need me any more."

And Aymar said, in a strange, suffocated voice, "I have nothing to offer you, Monsieur Perrelet, in exchange for my life, but thanks, which are . . . equally worthless."

"They are good enough," returned M. Perrelet roughly, "for an old fool." And without another word he walked out of the bedroom.

Laurent, puzzled and embarrassed, followed him.

"M. de la Rocheterie is all right," said M. Perrelet in an unenthusiastic voice, his foot on the step of his gig. "There is no more danger of pulmonary trouble, though he has had the nearest escape from congestion of the lungs that I ever came across."

"Was that why he was delirious last night?"

"How do you know he was?"

"I heard you say so just now."

The old surgeon looked sharply at him. "You did not hear what he was saying when you came to the door early this morning, did you?—Not, of course, that it matters," he added hastily.

Laurent stared at him. "No, I didn't catch a word. Why, was he saying anything uncomplimentary about me?"

"No, no!" returned M. Perrelet. "Oh no, not at all! Besides, delirium is too strong a word; he was only rambling." And he climbed up, but not before Laurent had seen his face relax in obvious relief. "Well, I must be off, Monsieur de Courtomer; I have an appointment. I sincerely trust that you will keep out of Guitton's reach."

He bent down, gripped his late assistant's hand very hard for a second, and, looking fixedly at the glove he was pulling on, said gruffly, "Life is full of disillusionments, young man,

never trust it!—But all the same, though I have never regretted being a bachelor, I could have done with a son—if he were like you! . . . Get on, mare!” And the gig passed out of the yard, leaving Laurent thoroughly bewildered. What an extraordinary thing to say to him!

As he got into the farmhouse he heard Aymar’s voice calling, an unusual phenomenon. He hurried to his open door. L’Oiseleur was sitting up in bed.

“Ask M. Perrelet to come in here again when he has finished with Madeleine,” he said earnestly. “I have something to say to him—something particular.”

“Oh, I am sorry!” ejaculated Laurent. “He has just driven off. He did not see Madeleine at all.”

Aymar remained an instant motionless. Then he said in a dulled voice, “It’s of no consequence,” and lay down again, with his face this time to the wall.

He was extremely silent all the rest of the evening, and as by ten o’clock he looked to Laurent much more ill than he had done at that hour in the morning, the latter decided to spend the night in his room, in an ancestral and not uncomfortable chair. What could Aymar and M. Perrelet have disagreed about, as they obviously had, and when could the disagreement have taken place? Clearly only during the doctor’s first visit—during the night, in fact. Then Aymar had been fibbing to him when he said that no conversation had passed between them. Pausing a moment over this distasteful idea he remembered with relief that, on M. Perrelet’s showing, Aymar had been slightly light-headed. His friend need not then have been consciously lying to him. Still, one couldn’t quarrel in delirium—the thing was preposterous; and surely no doctor would take offence at anything said in that state! What could M. Perrelet have been thinking about to be so touchy? He had seemed this evening as if he hardly cared what happened to the man he had dragged back from death and been so devoted to—“that lad of mine” as he had called him less than twenty-four hours ago. Laurent began to feel rather annoyed with the old surgeon, and, remembering too what he had said about his own ‘over-fidelity,’ even angry. What a cruelly unjust thing to hint at to Aymar, who had tried so hard to get his friend to leave him!

Aymar’s own voice broke in on his reflections and preparations.

“What are you doing there?” he demanded rather sharply.

"I am going to spend the night in here with you."

Aymar flung round instantly. "No, indeed you are not!" he said with vehemence. "If you do, I don't sleep in this bed!"

"Certainly I will not, then," returned Laurent, somewhat offended. He resumed his coat. "I don't wish to force my society on you to that extent!"

"Laurent," said his friend quickly, beseechingly, "I beg your pardon! I'm . . . I'm in a vile temper to-night. I am better alone, that is all I meant. . . . Forgive me for saying that!"

"My dear fellow!" said Laurent, instantly melted. He came over to the bed. How frightfully strained he looked! "Of course I forgive you! Well, let me shake up your pillows for you. You have something to drink there, haven't you? Promise me, at least, that you will call me if you need anything?"

He gave him his hand to show him that he bore him no rancour for his display of petulance, but he was rather embarrassed when Aymar bowed his head and put his lips to it. Decidedly L'Oiseleur was deeply shaken out of his composure to-night.

It was not until he was himself half undressed that the explanation of everything came on Laurent like a thunder-clap—of M. Perrelet's unaccountable demeanour, of Aymar's distress, of his own semi-banishment from his room just now. Last night, in fever, Aymar had let slip his carefully guarded secret—and *knew it*. Moreover, to have sent away M. Perrelet, who was so fond of him, who only yesterday was so wholeheartedly proclaiming his belief in him—to have sent him away, as it had, a changed man, it could be no honourable mystery after all. It *was* something disgraceful, something of which, for good reasons, Aymar could not clear himself . . . as he had acknowledged with his own lips.

That was why M. Perrelet had pushed him, Laurent, out of the room last night, why he had asked him this evening if he had overheard anything, and been relieved at his reply. He wanted him, poor fool, to preserve his illusions. . . . Fool, fool indeed, as Rigault, he knew, had always thought him, and blind beyond belief! And the fact that it had taken him hours to recognise what was now so horribly clear to him—that he had not at once realised the sharp significance of the doctor's profoundly altered attitude towards his

cherished patient, seemed to open beneath Laurent's feet further abysses of self-delusion. He had been so secure in this fool's paradise of his. . . . But it was Aymar, Aymar himself who had shattered it—Aymar who had so plainly showed alarm when he told him this morning that he had been talking in the night—Aymar whose demeanour to M. Perrelet also had altered . . . guiltily altered. . . . Aymar who had driven *him* out of his room for fear of a recurrence of the same thing. . . . Aymar who had in fact betrayed himself!

And with a sensation as though his heart were being slowly cased in ice Laurent de Courtomer sat on the side of the farmhouse bed staring at the dwindling candle, till at last it went out and left him in physical darkness also.

(5)

The coffee in the bowl steamed invitingly, and as long as Madeleine was in the kitchen Laurent made some pretence of eating the bread. The moment that she was gone he took his head between his hands and all but groaned aloud.

A very much curtailed visit to Aymar's room this morning had shown him what a wretchedly bad actor he himself was—almost as bad as M. Perrelet, whose bad acting it had nevertheless taken him, poor dunderhead, such a long time to see through. Aymar, he was sure, must have noticed the constraint in his manner—he who felt that the Aymar he had known and believed in and loved existed no longer—never had existed. It was that thought which made the blackness of his misery.

He took a great gulp of the hot coffee. How was he going to get through the day like this in the company of this unknown person, this *simulacrum* of L'Oiseleur, this man to whom no decent human being would ever willingly speak again? And even as he fiercely drank down the remainder of the coffee Fate answered his question by showing the unlikelihood of his being required, or indeed able, to spend it in this way at all. For Mme Allard burst abruptly into the kitchen gesticulating—"They are on their way—they will be here immediately! Hide, Monsieur, quickly!"

"What, soldiers?" cried Laurent. "Where?"

"Riding along the road. Jeannot has seen them. Oh, be quick, Monsieur, before they reach the house!"

"I've got a place," quoth Laurent. "Tell M. de la Rocheterie then!" And, suppressing the instinctive desire to rush in to him, he sped out of the farmhouse towards his walnut tree.

He might well congratulate himself on having chosen a refuge beforehand, and also on having already scaled it. Dropping with a thud, he flung himself flat on the thatch between the two sloping dormers of the barn, and almost immediately the foremost soldiers came clattering into the yard below. A moment later Laurent heard orders given to make a cordon round the place and search the outbuildings first, the voice that issued these being undoubtedly that of a *maréchal des logis*. They had then no commissioned officer with them, though, by the sound, they numbered a score or more. More clattering and shouting showed that these orders were being obeyed.

Laurent held his breath. But he knew that there existed no ladder at La Baussaine long enough to reach this roof. He heard the dragoons in the barn below, cursing; he heard them saying that this time they had got to find him, that Arbelles would be too hot to hold them if they did not. . . .

It seemed a long time before they gave up the search outside, and went into the farmhouse. And with the temporary fading of excitement and apprehension the anguish of the night rolled back again over Laurent's soul. He stretched himself out on the warm thatch of his eyrie and buried his face on his arms, and began to suffer even more than he had suffered then, because he was less stunned now, because this morning the agonising readjustment of ideas had begun in his mind—that readjustment which brought quite logically in its train the conclusion that all the time 'they' had been quite right at Arbelles. L'Oiseleur, whom he had so championed, on whose behalf he had gone through a whole gamut of emotions, had done a thing so infamous that, as Colonel Guitton had said, shooting was too good for him. . . . The Imperialist, hateful as he was, was less despicable, after all, than the man he had ill-treated. . . . Laurent writhed at the thought.

The situation could not go on: that was manifest even to his 'over-fidelity.' He saw now the true meaning of that remark, not so unjust to Aymar after all! What was he going to do, then? Leave La Rocheterie here without seeking to plumb the shameful secret, to tax him with it, and have to witness his avowal . . . or his attempt to lie about it?—No,

not that. At least, as he had never attempted to justify himself, he would not lie.

Why not? Why should he be so sure that La Rocheterie would not lie? He asked himself that, and all the reply that came was a picture of a face whose eyes were not those of a liar, nor the firm and sensitive mouth. . . . That mouth had said to him less than four days ago, "Try to go on believing that I am not a traitor!" . . . And here, already—

No, no! He did not believe it! The wave turned upon itself. There must be some other explanation; Ayamar could not, could not have done it. Those very words were in themselves a denial. And in that case, if he taxed him with the thing, he broke their friendship for ever. If Ayamar were innocent, he could never forgive him.

The sun was so hot now—for time was going on—that Laurent was obliged to clasp his hands together over the back of his neck. But nothing could interrupt his thoughts; they went circling back to their first standpoint. Innocent; with that 'haunted' look on him did he seem innocent—but he behaved all along as an innocent man would behave? M. Perrelet's early observations on that point came back to him. Yet Ayamar had tried to recall M. Perrelet yesterday evening. He had perhaps some explanation to offer of whatever it was he had said in the night. . . . But why could he not have offered him, Laurent, some explanation during all these weeks of companionship? Ayamar had seemed to feel that himself at their parting the other day. If he still was not going to tell him the story he would have to ask him for it—not so much because he believed him guilty, but because he could not endure the strain of ignorance. Ayamar *must* tell him why he 'had no one but himself to thank.'

By the time that Laurent had come to this resolution fresh sounds from below suddenly warned him that the soldiers were emerging from the farmhouse. He had been so absorbed that he had not realised that it must be nearly two hours since they came. Well, they had not found him, and unless they did so now . . .

An altercation seemed to be taking place about their ill-success. Only scraps of it floated up to him. "We ought to have gone on." . . . "It would not have been any use. Why, the impudent devil was laughing!" . . . "Yes, to begin with . . ." "I could have bet my boots that the cupboard . . ." . . . "What shall you report, *maréchal*?" "Why . . . hunted high and low and could find no . . ."

... "What about that unmade bed . . . coffee . . . ?" . . . "I did not see them," returned what was probably the non-commissioned officer's voice, and Laurent was sure that he winked.

"They've been questioning Aymar," he thought, amid the sounds of mounting and moving off below. "I suppose the search was amusing, but he must be in better spirits than I am to have laughed at it. . . . At any rate he has not treated me as he treated his men!"

Then he was horribly, bitinglly ashamed of himself.

He was too much obsessed by the thought of what he was going to do to allow a really prudent interval ere he descended his walnut tree, but once on *terra firma* he approached the house with a lagging step. As he went along the flagged passage to the kitchen he heard a sound of sobbing, and surmised that the troopers had made themselves unpleasant to Mme Allard. However, nothing seemed to matter much—not even that they had failed to find him.

Madeleine *was* sobbing, searching meanwhile in a press. But when she heard his step she turned round.

"Oh, Monsieur de Courtomer, an awful thing has happened!" She dabbed with her apron at her face, disfigured with crying, and Laurent ejaculated quickly, "What? Tell me!"

She gulped a moment, then recovered speech. "After they had searched every hole and corner for you, everywhere you can conceive, and I had told them I had no idea where you were, they began to threaten M. Aymar if he would not tell them . . . they said the most abominable things to him . . . and at last they said that as he was a Chouan they should imitate the Chouans——"

"Imitate the Chouans—what do you mean?" exclaimed Laurent.

"What they used to do in the old days to make people speak," gasped Madeleine.

"Good God!" said the young man, turning pale, for he knew by repute of those past methods.

"—And they turned me out of M. le Vicomte's room where they had been questioning me too, and when I came into the kitchen here there was one of them holding something in the fire—a ramrod, I think it was. I tried to get it from him and fling it away, but they held me . . ."

But Laurent was no longer there. With a cold sweat breaking out on him he was at the door of the bedroom. His horror had carried him there like a whirlwind—and then he

feared to enter because of what he might find. But the first thing he saw was Aymar, raising himself a little in the bed, and saying eagerly, "Are you sure they are gone? For Heaven's sake don't show yourself——"

"They are gone—but if they were not—Aymar, what in God's name have the devils been doing to you . . . and how could you let them . . . it wasn't worth it—my liberty! Let me see! Oh, if I had known! Let me see!" It came pouring out in incoherent distress, and, as L'Oiseleur relapsed on to his pillows again and shut his eyes, he was bending over him half choking. "My God, my God, what have they done?"

"I see Madeleine has been frightening you," said Aymar rather faintly, but with the glimmer of an amused smile. "That was all they did to me, mon ami—tried to frighten me."

And all the time the trickle of blood on his chin from his bitten underlip gave him the lie.

"Don't believe him!" cried Madeleine at the door, a bottle of oil and a bunch of rags in her hand. "They did more than that. . . . If only I had known where you were—I'd have told them fast enough!"

"I wish you had, I wish you had!" groaned Laurent. "For pity's sake tell me . . ."

"It's his arm, Monsieur," said Madeleine. And Laurent, now perceiving that the bedclothes were somewhat suspiciously bestowed, lifted them off and saw.

Only one of the burns was really severe, and that not nearly as bad as it might have been, given such an instrument and so unscrupulous an intention, but the five imprints of the iron between right wrist and elbow were more than enough for Laurent. The even spacing of an inch or two between each gave them an air of deliberation that was sickening. He fell on his knees by the bedside, uncontrollably moved, his English strain all swept away, and put his head down on the hand of that seared and blistered arm with the tears running down his face.

Aymar drew a sharp breath. "My dear Laurent," he said, opening his eyes and smiling at him, "excuse me . . . but your method of treatment . . . I believe oil, and not . . ." Then he fainted.

(6)

A greater peace reigned next afternoon in Madeleine Allard's little plot of garden, where the great pear-tree stood

sentinel over the stocks and gillyflowers and the old lavender hedge, than anyone acquainted with the events of the previous day would have believed possible. In the shade of the pear-tree had been placed the ancient chair, and in this, with his swathed right arm extended on its shabby leather, and his legs on another chair, was ensconced L'Oiseleur. Laurent, elbow-propped, lay near him on the grass, and every now and then threw at some prowling hen one of the tiny unripe pears which strewed it.

"You would not do for the artillery, mon cher," observed Aymar lazily, smiling down at him under half-dropped lashes.

"But I am not trying to hit," retorted Laurent equally lazily.

Abased in spirit to the very dust as he still was, he was also extraordinarily happy. For he had Aymar back, the real Aymar, who, wounded, weak and alone, had five times gone through agony for him—it must have been agony, whatever he said. He shot a swift but almost adoring glance at him now, where he leant his head back against Madeleine's best pillow-case. He was nearly as colourless as the linen, and the circles under his eyes were very deep and dark, but at least he did not seem to be in pain any longer. Yet while Aymar, ill and defenceless, had been undergoing *that* for his sake, he, in security, had been thinking. . . . The very remembrance almost choked him as he lay there under Aymar's eyes. If he knew. . . if he knew!

Aymar, who had heard the soldiers talking, believed Guitton to be at the back of the disgraceful business. It appeared that he had so bullied the first search-party when he learnt (not, however, for hours afterwards) of L'Oiseleur's presence at the farm that the second hardly dared to face him without the escaped prisoner, whom he correctly assumed to be there also. Indeed, Aymar was of opinion that the Colonel had gone so far as to hint that there was no need to stand on ceremony with *him*. . . . Perhaps that was even why they had been sent without an officer. He asserted that he bore the dragoons no ill-will for proceeding to extremities; they were really desperate—and if their commanding officer had assured them that, since he was beyond the pale, it did not matter what they did to him, could they be blamed for believing him? They had only used the ramrod as a last resource, and unwillingly—or there would not have been such a long prelude of threats first.

But, however much their victim tried to extenuate them,

Laurent felt, as he said, that he was not so proud of being a Frenchman as he had been. His disgust and horror suddenly got the better of him again now, and, abruptly smiting the grass, he swore. And then, for the twentieth time, he said, "How *could* you let them do it! And how I wish I had not told you about that dungeon!"

"My dear fellow, you are making a tempest in a teacup once more," responded Aymar. "And do you suppose that the exact degree of captivity with which you were threatened made any difference? Or—unconsciously he threw back his head a little against the pillow—"or that if you had been my worst enemy I should have yielded up the secret of your hiding-place to force? Think of that aspect of it, if it is any consolation to you; also of the fact that I got a testimonial out of it. For though they began by remarking that I was not likely to require any violent persuasion—Oh, I'm sorry, I did not mean to tell you that—they ended by saying that I was a stubborn devil, which I took as a high compliment. . . . No, Laurent, in all seriousness, it was child's play to what it might have been."

"Even if that were true," said Laurent, pulling up grass distractedly, "you did not know whether at any moment it might not cease being 'child's play'—nor when it was going to end at all!" And as Aymar said nothing to this, he shot out the query, "Why *did* it end?"

"Perhaps owing to the intervention of your patron saint," suggested Aymar, smiling. "He had considerable experience of the effects of heat, we are told.—No, I think they were ashamed to go on any longer, and a little frightened at what they had done, insignificant though it was. Moreover, iron does not keep hot for ever, and though they talked of going into the kitchen to reheat it I really think they dared not face Madeleine again. My impression is that she screamed continuously throughout, and that distressed me more than anything, because I was afraid you might hear her, and come in."

"I only wish I had!" sighed Laurent, running his fingers through his hair. "But, Aymar"—for he was unable to leave the hated subject—"if the accursed thing was cooling, as you say, how is it that the last burn is so much the worst."

Aymar looked up at the pear-tree. "Because they kept the ramrod on about three times as long, that is why. . . . What is that book you are not reading?"

Laurent raised himself and laid on his knee the little copy

of *The Vicar of Wakefield* which he had inadvertently brought away from Arbelles in his pocket.

"Ah, my old friend," remarked L'Oiseleur, and fell to turning over the pages with one hand.

Laurent returned to his pose on the grass. Yes, Aymar could talk and even jest about yesterday's ordeal; he would never be able to do so about that horrible inquisition at Arbelles, in which he had suffered no actual physical violence.

Presently, indeed, the reader gave an exclamation of amusement. "Laurent, listen to what I have lighted on!" And he read out, in his careful English, "'My friends,' said I, 'this is severe weather in which you are come to take me to a prison; and it is particularly unfortunate at this time as one of my arms has lately been burnt in a terrible manner' . . ."

Laurent could not help smiling. "Really," he remarked appreciatively, "that book is extraordinarily apt. It always seems to hit the situation."

"Yes," agreed Aymar, "for it goes on to say, 'And I want clothes to cover me.' " He glanced at the three or four inches of wrist protruding from the sleeve of M. d'Arbelles' coat. "But how did this unfortunate divine come by his burnt arm? I have not read it."

"By rescuing his infant children from his house, which burst into flames before his eyes in what I have always considered the most surprising manner. If you'll give me the book I will find the place—it is a few chapters earlier." He reached up, found the page, and read. "'It was now near midnight that I came to knock at my door: all was still and silent—my heart dilated with unutterable happiness, when, to my amazement, I saw the house bursting out into a blaze of fire, and every aperture red with conflagration. I gave a loud, convulsive outcry, and fell upon the pavement insensible.' "

"Very surprising indeed," assented Aymar gravely. "But tell me, why did you say that the book was always so appropriate? I do not remember in our readings any other circumstances of the life of M. Primrose which your ingenuity could apply to either of us."

Laurent bent his head to conceal from him how red he had got. How could he have been such a fool as to let slip that remark? For what had been in his mind faced him now as he turned back from Chapter XXIV to Chapter XXII—the famous and disturbing heading of the intermediate chapter, which had given him such a shock at Arbelles—

'NONE BUT THE GUILTY CAN BE LONG AND COMPLETELY MISERABLE.'

"I—I can't find the other place," he stammered, hastily turning over the leaves to get away from the damning phrase.

"But surely you can remember what the incident was?" persisted Aymar. "Come now!" and he threw a pear on to the book, while the unwary Laurent, thankful at least to have got the volume out of the enquirer's hands, cudgelled his brains desperately. At last inspiration leapt into them.

"This is what I meant. Don't you remember, somewhere near the beginning, where his daughter falls into a torrent—not a salmon river, though—and is rescued by a stranger who plunges in?" He turned feverishly in search of the episode and read it, and, encouraged by his escape, looked up at his friend with a meaning smile and added, "We are told a little earlier that 'the stranger's conversation, which was at once pleasing and instructive, induced me to wish for a continuance of it.'" Then he closed the dangerous volume firmly, returned it to his own pocket, and dropped his head again upon his arms on the warm grass.

"The sun is getting round," observed Aymar presently. "No, I am all right. I like it on my feet. Come and lean up here; you will be out of it then."

So Laurent dragged himself nearer and rested his back against the side of the chair. Aymar amused himself by gently pulling his hair.

"Tiens," said Laurent with a little yawn, "that is what Maman used to do to send me to sleep when I was small. It generally did; if not, she would tell me a fairy story. Tell me one!" His head dropped on to Aymar's knee.

The hand left his hair, and there was silence.

"If I told you a story, Laurent," came L'Oiseleur's voice at last, "it would not be a fairy story. Nor do I think it would send you to sleep." And, after a longer pause still, he added, so low that Laurent barely heard it, "No, not to-day."

But Laurent was already carrying the words with him into a land of dreams where they interpreted themselves as something quite different.

(7)

But even as misfortune pursued the Reverend Dr. Primrose, pressing on him a fresh calamity in every chapter, so

with Dr. Primrose's readers. The day of peace to which they were both looking forward when Aymar was next morning installed again under the pear-tree was rudely broken by the advent of a letter to Mme Allard from Jérôme, her elder son, announcing his immediate return, ill. And Jérôme, there was no possibility of doubt, would instantly denounce Laurent's presence to the garrison at Arbelles.

"But not yours, surely," broke in Laurent when he heard this, thinking of Madeleine's devotion.

"It is true that he would not find me a very profitable speculation," said Aymar dryly. "But I do not choose to risk a second turning out at the hands of an Imperialist. Madeleine has a plan for despatching me to her brother-in-law at Port-Marie, about six miles away, on the coast. There is no need, however, for you to wait until I can be assured of a fresh shelter. I suggest that you hurry off at once, especially as the letter speaks of an Imperial victory on the frontier. Jérôme may arrive to-day."

Laurent sat down upon the grass. "We go together," he said simply. "Tell me now about this brother-in-law."

It appeared that Michel Royer was a fisherman of some means and of Royalist leanings, having been out in the war of '99. There was therefore reasonable hope that he would shelter them, and Jeannot had been sent on the farm mare with a letter to ask this favour.

Laurent took it very philosophically; there was nothing else to do, it seemed to him. "The coast too," he observed. "Here is the finger of Providence. Was I not talking of returning by sea?"

But he could see that Aymar was not finding philosophy so easy—who would, as weak as he? He lay back frowning, looking very tired.

"Yes," he said listlessly, "you might find it convenient."

"But you?" said Laurent. "It is not good for you to be bundled about like this, and moreover it is not necessary. You ought to go home now to be nursed; you need so much care still. And Port-Marie is in exactly the opposite direction from Sessignes, is it not?"

Aymar shut his eyes. "Yes," he answered, his voice grating a little, "it is; but it may be very convenient for me also to be on the coast. When I am a little stronger, I shall very likely leave France altogether."

Laurent stared at him thunderstruck. The clean-cut sensitive mouth was set in a line that was half resolution, half

pain. God in Heaven, what did he mean by that? As he tried in one and the same mental process to arrive at his inner meaning and to ward it off from him, the face, the chair, the background all rocked for a second before his sight.

"*Leave France altogether!*" he repeated when he could find his voice.

Aymar opened his eyes again, but he did not look at him. "Yes," he said. Then he added, "Perhaps." And on that Madeleine, sniffing audibly, came hurrying over the grass in her heelless shoes.

(8)

It was evening, saffron and sea-green. Jeannot had come back from Port-Marie with a letter. Michel Royer would receive the two gentlemen, but they must not arrive till dark, and he would meet them at the turning under the chestnuts, half a mile out of the village.

"*I shall very likely leave France altogether.*"

Whatever Laurent said or did in that wind-blown, lovely, interminable day of waiting had those words sounding through it. Surely, though Aymar might feel, as he had said, that he was unable to clear himself, surely, with the consciousness of innocence to sustain him he might try—or, at any rate, remain and mutely endure till that very endurance should speak for him. Instead of that, L'Oiseleur, the incarnation of courage and daring, was contemplating running away. That, surely, could only mean one thing. . . . The ramrod with its attendant heroism and horror had altered nothing; facts were too hard to be melted in the crucible of emotion. Laurent began to see that now. And, numb with misery, he fought in the little garden-plot with the spectre which yesterday, in the same place, he had thanked God was laid for ever.

At last it was dusk, and they could start. That Aymar's burnt arm should run no risk of contact with anything they put him on the right hand of the one long seat; Laurent sat next him, and Jeannot drove from the left. And very soon Madeleine and her tearful farewells and the low buildings of La Baussaine were gone.

Heavy clouds were lumbering up over what had been the sunset. Aymar hardly answered anything that was said to him, and indeed conversation was difficult, for the idiot boy's driving was rudimentary, the farm-cart, though light, springless,

and the roads which they had to take abominable—one succession of deep ruts, in and out of which they continuously rolled and jolted. About half-way it began to rain. Laurent silently arranged the piece of sacking provided round his friend's shoulders, and as they sat there, with bent heads, holding their rough cape round them, it seemed to him that they were rather a sorry pair of outcasts. Yet it might have been amusing and venturous, this odyssey. Perhaps that was what L'Oiseleur was feeling so intensely. But . . . if that horrible thing should be true . . . he had made himself the outcast. . . . And more than once Laurent's thoughts went back to that drive in England, rather more than a year ago, when he hardly knew him, and was so elated at taking home a lion. He remembered thinking afterwards that he had been too garrulous, and that his guest in consequence had withdrawn himself a little. Now L'Oiseleur was infinitely farther away than when he had been a stranger; and Laurent himself had never had less heart for converse.

At last they came to the sharp turn of the road where they were to meet Royer. But even in the gloom under the trees it was apparent that there was no one there. Ayamar climbed wearily down, remarking that they were perhaps too punctual, and the idiot boy refusing to wait on events, but driving off again, the two fugitives were left stranded in the semi-darkness to await their host. The rain, however, had stopped.

"This begins not to be amusing," remarked Ayamar after a few minutes; and indeed there was no amusement in his voice. "Dieu! How tired I am!"

He had sat down on a log that lay, in the long wet grass, close to a broken-down gate which had once closed the entrance to a little lane, and against this gate he now leant back. Overhead the chestnut leaves were gently dripping.

"I'll go along the road a little and see if I can meet the man," said Laurent.

In a few moments he came striding back, rather angry. "Ayamar, where are you? A confoundedly annoying thing has happened. I met Royer in the road there, and he says he has changed his mind. It is too risky, he thinks, to take us into his house in the village, but he says that just along the coast to our left there is a smugglers' cave, the 'Panier,' which we can easily reach, and which is quite habitable. He will show us the way, and he is bringing some provisions with him. He will be here himself in a minute or two."

Aymar on his log in the dusk was silent for a couple of seconds, then he said, "If this is a joke, it is a damnably bad one."

"It is not a joke. I am far too much annoyed to jest. But of course we cannot force the man to take us in."

"Well I," declared L'Oiseleur, "am not going to set out at this time of night for a cave along the coast."

"But you cannot spend the night here by the side of the road!" cried Laurent.

"Why not?" enquired his friend.

"My dear Aymar, after that fever—itselt the result of a night in the open!"

"I assure you," replied Aymar, dropping his head on to his hand, "that I don't care if I get a hundred fevers. I am not going any farther. I . . . can't."

Laurent stood looking down at him in dismay. L'Oiseleur's courage failing him at last! What on earth was he to do?

"Let us go to the inn at Port-Marie then—if there is one—and risk it," he suggested in some desperation.

"You mean that you would run the risk for my sake? I have already been told that I allow you to carry your devotion too far. No; go to your cave by yourself; I will find it in the morning—perhaps."

"I wish M. Perrelet had minded his own business!" said Laurent sharply. "Come on, Aymar!"

"I tell you I am going no farther. Leave me, for God's sake!"

"Don't be absurd! How can you imagine that I should do such a thing?"

Aymar made a dimly seen gesture. "It's all I ask! . . . Leave me—leave me! You would if you knew!"

And, as by a fleet arrow, Laurent was transfixed by annoyance. If only he did know instead of having to listen to these eternal hints and innuendoes!

"But *till* I know!" he riposted sharply. "L'Oiseleur, for God's sake be a man! . . . Here is my arm."

Aymar pulled himself instantly to his feet. "No, thanks!—Which is the way?"

It was too dark to see his face, but his tone showed only too clearly the effect of this adjuration. Even as he asked the question Michel Royer had come up. Laurent, keeping down something in his own breast at once miserable and fierce, drew the fisherman a little aside and whispered to him,

"My friend is ill. He may want assistance—but don't touch his right arm. Give me half of what you are carrying."

The transfer was made. "This is the way, gentlemen," said the vague figure, in a hoarse voice which seemed to have known many tempests, and led off past the broken gate and down the very track by whose entrance Aymar had been sitting. Aymar followed, without a glance at his friend, and that friend brought up the rear, in a perfect daze of misery, irritation and anxiety.

(9)

Some three-quarters of an hour afterwards Laurent stood, lantern in hand, in the smugglers' cave, the 'Panier,' and looked remorsefully down at Aymar, lying at his feet on the rough bed of sailcloth and seaweed in the profound slumber of exhaustion. His own burst of irritation had subsided now, and the sight of that bandaged arm made him doubly ashamed of it; though as for having forced Aymar, as he had, to use the last shred of his strength, he did not see what else he could have done. But at least it was he himself, and not Royer, who, when they had reached their goal, had guided L'Oiseleur, blind with fatigue as he was, to his couch, on which he had dropped like a log, not to move since.

Royer had gone, promising to come again to-morrow. The 'Panier,' as far as Laurent could see by lantern-light, seemed wonderfully dry and spacious, and there was a sufficiency of food and coverings. So there was nothing to do but to go to sleep; and in sleep he could forget the cruel rebirth which had taken place in his mind . . . perhaps in sleep it would even go from him again. He lay down as quietly as possible by L'Oiseleur and pulled a little of the covering over himself.

But it was soon obvious to him that he was not going to sleep; he was far too conscious of Aymar's proximity—too conscious that his theory about Aymar was crumbling to pieces . . . as Aymar had foretold. Yet it was he himself who felt the traitor. How could he bear to lie there, almost touching that arm, martyred for him, and realise, as he did at length, that that martyrdom could not change the past! It still was 'If you knew!' It still was that L'Oiseleur, for all his courage and endurance, quailed before the thought of

a future in his own country. Why . . . why . . . why?

His thoughts buzzed and stung like flies. And now the recurrent plunge of the tide, the sound that none can stay, began to torment him. Every time the waves splashed outside they seemed to reiterate something monotonous and final, some message charged with ruin and farewell. And when Aymar, who had lain beside him all the time like a man drugged or dead, stirred, and in stirring touched him, it was more than Laurent could bear. He slipped from under the covering and groped his way across the cave to its mouth.

It was a cloudy night. The sea looked dull—not sinister, not violent, just a dimly seen expanse of moving mud. There was no moon visible and not a star. It was like his own thoughts. Laurent sat down on a keg at the mouth of the cave and gave himself over to the contemplation of these.

They were far more bitter than on that night at La Baussaine, when the veil of self-deception had first been rent, more bitter even than in that hot vigil on the roof, because of the stage of revulsion and remorse which lay between . . . and fruitlessly. For his reason coldly said to him, 'His undoubted affection for you, his more than undoubted strength of will, may have carried him for your sake through an act of heroism, and yet that does not prove that he could not have done . . . the other thing.' And it was in vain that his heart cried out, 'Yes, it does, it does, it does!' because reason then retorted, 'Why, then, has he not told you "everything," as he said that day at Arbelles he wished he had? Why did he not tell you yesterday under the pear-tree? Evidently he will not—till you ask him!' But that Laurent would never do now. He would leave him, but he would never ask him for his secret.

He could not abandon him yet, but when Aymar was well enough he would say that he must go back to Vendée (as Aymar had urged him) and thus their parting would have no special significance about it. All the same, he would be tearing him out of his heart for ever, deliberately slaying and burying the friendship which had come to mean so immeasurably much to him . . . and condemning himself to go through the rest of his life not knowing the real truth.

He covered his face with his hands, and pictures of the bright and dishonoured head rose constantly before him: Aymar that night in Devonshire, under his roof, looking at him with that quiet and immensely attractive smile—Aymar in the great salon at the Hôtel de Saint-Séverin with the King

talking to him, the magnet for every gaze—Aymar at Arbelles, helpless, suffering, despised . . . and all the dearer for it then—Aymar wringing out his wet locks by the swirling river in which he had just risked his life—for him. . . . And he wondered if he would always see that picture-gallery when they had parted, and he heard his name mentioned with loathing—his friend, his friend, who *could* not have done the thing they said he had, even though his own men believed it and had wreaked vengeance on him—even though he, Laurent, his champion of champions, was at last brought to saying so too. . . .

Was he indeed saying that? saying it with the slow, hot tears running down against his fingers? The sea was saying it relentlessly. . . . He took away his hands and brushed off the moisture, and found that he must have been there much longer than he knew, for it was light outside, with a cold and heartless light, and from the port a sail was stealing out . . . as Aymar's might one day. And with that, out of the darkness still prevalent within the cave, there came Aymar's voice, no more than a little drowsy.

"What are you doing over there, Laurent? Did I disgust you so with my . . . my want of manhood, that you will not share the same bed with me?"

Laurent jumped. He had no idea that Aymar was awake, nor that he himself was visible. In spite of the words, the tone was not sarcastic; it merely held a sort of sad amusement.

"I . . . I found I couldn't sleep," he stammered hoarsely.

"You won't sleep sitting on that barrel!"

Almost unconsciously Laurent got up and sat down on the sand, putting his shoulders against the rock. "It is dawn," he murmured.

He heard Aymar sigh.

"Is your arm hurting you?"

"No, thanks. . . . Laurent, come back to bed."

Laurent dug his fingers into the sand. "I was abominably rude to you this evening," he said with a gulp.

"It was, I dare say, deserved. At any rate you succeeded in getting me here."

"Well, go to sleep again," murmured Laurent.

"I will, if you will tell me why you are sitting out there."

There was a long pause, filled by the sea. Laurent had just made up his mind to one course of action—and now, suddenly, he was weighing the opposite. Why not? It was more

honest, fairer to *him*. And there was so much in the voice, though it was even and unemotional, that tore his very heart.

"I am sitting here," he said at last, slowly, "because I was thinking about you. Because the last few days I could not help . . ." He leant forward, clenched his hands between his knees, and said in a rush, "Aymar, what did you say to M. Perrelet that night?"

In the darkness Aymar observed quietly, "It is that, then. I thought so. God knows what I said! At any rate M. Perrelet did not like it." He gave a desolate little laugh. "Am I responsible to you also?"

"I never meant to ask you," said Laurent, fighting down his misery. "You know what I have always thought about it all. . . . And after that ramrod too . . ." A sound like a sob escaped him. "You *must* tell me something, Aymar. I'm . . . I'm too bewildered to go on in the dark any longer."

Neither sound nor movement came from the other end of the cave; only, outside, the sea came up twice, saluted the sand, and withdrew. Then Aymar spoke. "Yes, I must do it. I ought to have done it long ago—I know it. Only . . . well, you will know soon enough why I did not. . . . Do you want me to tell you the story now?"

"Good God, no!" said Laurent, raising his head. "To-morrow. . . ." And then all his deep affection and a certain cold dread, warring together, swept over him. He sprang to his feet, and, going uncertainly over to him, dropped on his knees beside him. "—Or never, Aymar, if you choose. Let it be never then! I have no right——"

"No right! If ever in the world a man had a right! You ought not to have had to ask. As you have asked"—a suspicion of hardness crept into his voice—"you shall have it, every word, to-morrow . . . or rather to-day. What time is it?"

Laurent struck a light and looked at his watch, and had for his pains a little picture of his friend lying there, with his bandaged arm, challenged at last, on the heels of illness and suffering and extreme fatigue. The tinder must have shown the wretchedness on his own face, for Aymar put out his left hand a little and said very gravely, "Why are you reproaching yourself, Laurent? *You* have no cause—no shadow of cause! And as you do not yet know how much I have . . . you could still lie down here again . . . for a little."

And Laurent came instantly. He tried to seize the extended hand as he lay down, but it evaded him; and he lay

there on his face, motionless, dreading the day. But the traitorous thoughts were stilled. . . .

(10)

Despite its spiritless dawn, it was a fine morning, with a breeze and circling gulls—not at all a morning on which to be executed . . . for that had been Laurent's sensation on rising. Only he was not sure now which was the victim and which the executioner.

The two of them had just finished breakfast outside the cave. Laurent felt himself far the more outwardly nervous, and when Aymar became absolutely silent he grew very nervous indeed, thinking that the next moment, or the next, would certainly hear him begin. But Aymar, perhaps, was experiencing a shrinking from that moment more acute still, for when Laurent, unable to bear the tension any longer, scrambled to his feet and picked up the loaf and the empty bowls, Aymar too got up, and without a word to him walked down towards the sea. He stood there with his head bent; and Laurent remembered once more how he had seen him first, in the sunshine, by moving water. He turned and went into the cave.

He had barely put away the loaf when Aymar's figure darkened the entrance.

"I will tell you what you want to know now," he said. "It shall be as short as I can make it, but even at that it will take a little time if you are to hear everything."

"Shall I come outside?" asked Laurent, not looking at him.

"No, I can tell you better in here, if you will allow me. The sea is disturbing—louder than that salmon river of yours." He looked round for a seat, and finally sat down on the heap of seaweed.

Then he too had been thinking of their first meeting. Laurent fetched for himself the keg he had sat on during the night.

"I must say again," resumed Aymar after a moment, "that I am fully aware you ought never to have had to ask for this. It was owed you on every count. But at Arbelles I . . . put it off from day to day; when I was turned out there was not time, and afterwards at Madeleine's, when I had at least one excellent opportunity, I—well, never mind

why I did not take it. The only good excuse I have for my silence is, that to tell you the story properly I must have told you something rather intimate . . . and I did not know you very well at first. My other excuse is not so good." He paused, and played for a moment with the earing of the sail near his left hand. "The other excuse is merely . . . my own cowardice. I thought that when you knew you would— You see how M. Perrelet took it."

"But in M. Perrelet's case you were wandering—whatever you said," began Laurent, feeling a chill at the heart.

"Yes, I probably made him think it was worse than it was." He raised his head and smiled, a little drawn smile. "But I am quite clear-headed now . . . and you will not like what I am going to tell you, Laurent. (Please don't interrupt me, or I shall not be able to tell you at all.) Because I know that you have thought, until quite recently, that I was shielding someone." For the first time his voice betrayed real difficulty. "And I suppose I was. I was shielding . . . myself!"

As it came out he looked straight at his hearer, but Laurent, as though he had been the accused, could not meet his eyes. He put his hand over his own, his elbow on his knees.

"Go on," he said, all but inaudibly. He had turned very pale.

Aymar went on.

CHAPTER VI

THE ROAD TO THE BEECH TREE

“Là-haut sur la montagne
Il y a un pré;
Les perdrix et les cailles
Y vont chanter.
J’ai pris mon arbalète.
J’y suis allé;
Croyant en tuer quatre,
J’ai tout manqué.
C’est le cœur de ma mie
Que j’ai blessé . . .”

(1)

THE whole unhappy story, the substance of which was told that morning in the cave, began on the radiant April day when Aymar de la Rocheterie rode along the high bank of the river Aven on his way from the conference with du Tremblay and other Royalist chiefs at Saint-Pierre de Plesguen to his own house of Sessignes. He had left his men, some five hundred strong, under M. Nicolas de Fresne, his second-in-command, ensconced, very inconveniently for the Bonapartists, in the Bois des Fauvettes, a spur of the great forest of Armor. And now, well pleased with the scheme for which he and du Tremblay were chiefly responsible, and in which he and his ‘Eperviers’ would presently play a part, he was intending for once to spend a night under his own roof, since by taking this particular route back to his little force he would pass the very gates of the château. And so he could pay his respects to his grandmother, who ruled it for him, and to his cousin, Mme de Villecresne, who dwelt there, neither widow nor wife.

And thus he came, about midday, to the village of Keraven, and found to his surprise that it was full of troops of the line—but Royalist, for they wore the white cockade—and just outside, its pleasant inn, the *Abeille d’Or*, encountered their

commanding officer, the Chevalier de Saint-Etienne, who was a friend of his. To him he expressed the hope that his officers had not eaten up everything in the hostelry, since he had been intending to get a meal there.

"Plenty to eat," replied M. de Saint-Etienne, as Aymar took the bridle of his horse to lead him off. "And I have a private room . . . at least . . ." he hesitated, "there is someone else in it, but——"

"Avow," said Aymar, laughing, "that the other person is Mme de Saint-Etienne, disguised as your youngest subaltern." For his friend was newly married, and much in love.

"No," said the young soldier seriously, "it is only a middle-aged gentleman of my acquaintance, who stopped here to bait, and who is going to share my meal. Will you not——" He broke off, said rather hurriedly, "I'll see you when you have put up your horse," and vanished—to Aymar's considerable surprise, since he was plainly on the verge of asking him also to share this repast.

Aymar was going back to the inn door when, just in front of one of the open windows, a spur came loose, and, stooping to fasten it, he overheard a man's voice, with an authoritative but kindly ring about it, saying: "So that was L'Oiseleur you were talking to! I have always thought that I should like to make his acquaintance; here is the opportunity. Can you persuade him, do you think, to come in and share an omelette with a dull old country gentleman?"

"That is just what I——" his friend's voice was beginning, when Aymar hastily pulled off his spur altogether and walked out of earshot. By the time he had readjusted it on the doorstep the young Colonel emerged and said, smiling, "'Mme de Saint-Etienne' is anxious to make your acquaintance, La Rocheterie. I am afraid I have already told him who you are—needless to say, I can answer for his discretion and sentiments rather better than for my own."

"Your own discretion, my dear fellow, is as remarkable as if you really had a lady in there!" retorted Aymar, amused, and putting an arm through his. "But who is this veiled stranger?"

"Oh, nobody in particular," said the youthful commander, getting rather red. "But you know how peppery old gentlemen sometimes are if their convenience is not consulted."

Yet it was no 'old gentleman' who was sitting at the window of the parlour into which Saint-Etienne now drew his friend, but a man of middle age with a distinguished and

intelligent face—M. du Parc, to whom Aymar was duly introduced, and whose conversation, as the three sat at déjeuner together, he soon found anything but dull. M. du Parc might be a country squire, but he had a very pretty, mordant wit, tempered by a great deal of natural bonhomie and humour; moreover L'Oiseleur could not help feeling that he possessed a wide experience of life and of men, though exactly in what capacity he could not be sure. But M. du Parc did not obtrude himself unnecessarily into the talk; he rather listened with a sort of benevolent shrewdness to what the two young Royalists had to say to each other.

Saint-Etienne, it appeared, was, much to his disgust, under orders to remain at Keraven for three days, according to some plan of Sol de Grisolles, the general-in-chief of the Royalist forces in Brittany. "I would not object to waiting," he announced, "if there were only a chance of doing something meanwhile—and indeed I am rather expected to make myself unpleasant, if I can. But I find I am not strong enough to make an attack on the Imperialists over at Saint-Goazec, as I should like to do."

"Under a certain Colonel Richard, are they not?" enquired Aymar. "Is it impossible? How strong are they?"

"Too strong for me, and sure to be well disposed round Saint-Goazec, which is easily defended country. But it is deuced tempting, because I am pretty sure that they do not yet know I am here. But why indulge in these dreams? I could not bring off an attack."

"However, you ought to be able to dispose neatly of any parties that they send out in this direction," observed Aymar. "I drink to your luck in that respect."

"Why leave it to luck, gentlemen?" interposed M. du Parc suddenly. "Put a bit of cheese on the end of a string, and draw it along in front of the mouse's hole, and the mouse will come out . . . especially if he doesn't know that there is a cat in the neighbourhood."

"But we haven't got a bit of cheese, sir," replied Saint-Etienne, laughing rather ruefully, "and, moreover, if the whole mouse came out, this cat alone is not strong enough to deal with him, as I have said."

Aymar had fixed his eyes on M. du Parc. What wisdom and daring there was in that smiling, rather inscrutable visage! He turned them on his friend. "But if you had another cat to help you?"

"Whom do you mean?"

"Myself," replied L'Oiseleur, a gleam in his eyes. "My men are in the Bois des Fauvettes."

"But you could not move them over here rapidly enough, nor without the Imperialists getting wind of it!"

"No," agreed the young Chouan, "but I did not mean that. I meant that if one could only get Richard to march out in that direction, we could both leap on him simultaneously from our respective positions."

"Yes," said his friend, "but to march out in that direction is, I fancy, the last thing he is likely to do."

Aymar propped his chin on his fists. "Then he ought to have some inducement provided to make him march out—as M. du Parc has said, a bit of cheese.—Have you got a map here?"

Studying the two young men bent over it, M. du Parc himself here remarked serenely, "Your little problem, gentlemen, reminds me of an episode in the fighting in '95, when two Royalists of my acquaintance, commanding bodies of volunteers, were in exactly the same situation as you. They solved the problem rather neatly."

"How?" enquired the couple eagerly.

"By making one of the cats the cheese. My friend contrived to let the Blues know that he and his men would be passing a certain point at a certain time, meaning the Republicans in consequence to ambush him there——"

"And what happened?" asked Saint-Etienne.

"The Blues were ambushed themselves by the other party," responded M. du Parc, with a smile, "and the two Royalist bodies together accounted for them completely."

The light in L'Oiseleur's eyes grew, but Saint-Etienne said: "It was a very risky move, though, sir—since it depended, I suppose, upon the most exact co-operation."

"Certainly—but twenty years ago one had to take those risks, so I have been told." To which M. de Saint-Etienne, looking at the older man with a little smile, said: "Yes, those were days of giants."

Meanwhile Aymar de la Rocheterie, returned to his study of the map, observed thoughtfully, "When I get my supplies of ammunition I shall be moving my men over the Aven. The bridge they call Pont-aux-Rochers, between these wooded heights here—the bridge which I shall in fact cross—would be an excellent spot for an ambush; but that ammunition, I am sorry to say, will not reach me before the end of the week, and I cannot leave the forest until I have it."

"What a pity!" commented Saint-Etienne regretfully. "The bridge is ideally situated for me, since, owing to this road here, I could actually start some hours after the Imperialists and still get there before them. And, as a matter of fact, an ambush would not be essential. Your men and mine together would be able to account for Colonel Richard, if only we could tempt him to come between us."

L'Oiseleur took his head in his hands and thought. The plan appealed to him very strongly. Could he not go back to the forest now and move his men without waiting for the supplies? But the probability was that he would then never receive these at all, and he was pledged to co-operation with du Tremblay in eight or nine days, and would need all the ammunition he could lay hands on. No, the idea must be abandoned. He explained to Saint-Etienne why.

"Besides," M. du Parc reminded them, "an indispensable part of the scheme is that one of you must inform the enemy of your intended movements, or of your ally's movements, if you will. And it is not, in practice, a very easy thing to send information purporting to come treacherously from your side in such a way that the enemy is ready to believe it. The best plan," he added with a fine smile, "is to appear to *sell* it."

Aymar de la Rocheterie made a movement. "I think I would rather forgo a coup than do—or seem to do—a thing like that!"

The smile grew. "Oh, *you* don't do it, Monsieur de la Rocheterie," explained this astute old country gentleman. "That would be a trifle too suspicious; the enemy might not swallow the bait. One of your men who has a grudge against you 'sells' the information."

They all laughed, and the conversation passed to other matters; indeed, not long afterwards Aymar was again in the saddle, wishing Saint-Etienne, and being wished, good luck. And he rode off, thinking no more of that half-forged scheme for luring out the enemy, save with a moment's regret that it could not be. The same sun shone, he had before his eyes the same face—the only face in the world for him—and nothing warned him that in the *Abeille d'Or* at Keraven Fate had sat at table with him.

(2)

The road went for a while under larches, absorbed in their enchanted dream of spring; and L'Oiseleur rode beneath

their green mist absorbed in his own dream. He was thinking neither of the 'Eperviers' nor of the Emperor, but of the meeting full of pain and self-repression and happiness towards which he was riding.

Avoye de la Rocheterie—Avoye de Villecresne as she had been for the last six years—was Aymar's first cousin. Her father had gone to the guillotine with his parents; her mother, widowed at twenty-three, had adopted the little orphaned boy of five, and for two years had given him such care as her broken heart and delicate health could compass. Then she too died, and the two children passed into the guardianship of their paternal grandmother, the dowager Vicomtesse de la Rocheterie, and by that redoubtable lady they had been brought up as brother and sister. When Avoye was eighteen Mme de la Rocheterie, who was determined that Aymar should not marry her, brought about for her granddaughter what she considered a suitable match with a fashionable and wealthy man much older than herself, the Comte Frédéric de Villecresne. The inexperienced girl felt no objections to the marriage, was even rather flattered by the attentions of this man of the world, while Aymar, her almost brother, constituted so natural a part of her life that she hardly figured to herself how little he would fill it in the future. As for Aymar himself, the final arrangements were concluded when he was away, and without his knowledge. Moreover, he was still a minor. The marriage took place. Four months later Avoye left her husband and went to live with relatives of her mother's in Paris.

Over this outcome of Mme de la Rocheterie's schemes there took place at Sessignes a combat as fierce as any which the château could have witnessed since its foundation. Aymar, now of age, insisted that his cousin should be invited to make Sessignes once more her home if she wished. She had no other, and she refused to take her husband's money. His grandmother pointed out that M. de Villecresne's house was still open to her; on which the young man asked her whether even in the crusading days of their ancient race any lady of the line had consented to enter a harem. Plain speech was a luxury from which the Vicomtesse never shrank, and she joined battle. It was most undesirable that Avoye should return to live under the same roof as a young unmarried kinsman. Aymar replied that part of her objection was mere hypocrisy, and twofold at that; he knew that while, on the one hand, she cared not a snap of the fingers for other people's

opinion, on the other she considered that no breath of scandal dare attach itself to a ménage over which she ruled. The rest was an insult to Mme de Villecresne and to himself. Even apart from the fact, of which he professed himself fully aware, that Avoye had no feelings for him other than for a brother, as a Catholic she would never divorce her husband and marry again—for Mme de la Rocheterie, though herself at heart a free-thinker, was far too aristocratic not to have had her grandchildren reared in the strict tenets of the Church. And if his grandmother placed so little reliance on his self-control, he would contrive to absent himself a good deal, to travel, as much as his means permitted, to go and fight abroad, perhaps. But Avoye should come back.

And Avoye, not being to her knowledge in love with her cousin, did come back, and in the end made Sessignes once more her home. Aymar carried out his programme; but perhaps it was his very absences from the house which was so full of the memories of their joint childhood which showed her at last her own heart. Yet, however much now in name only, she was still the wife of Frédéric de Villecresne, and as such she knew quite well that her cousin regarded her. She had made the mistake of her life; she must pay for it. But she did not realise how heavily Aymar was paying too. And no doubt it was only because of the tenacious, self-denying Northern blood which the cousins shared that they were either of them able to stand the strain of a position which made such difficult demands, to go on waiting year after year, to face the prospect of waiting, most likely, for years longer, until death should remove the barrier to their happiness.

At times, indeed, it did seem as if they might not have to wait much longer. Last year, when Aymar had undertaken his self-imposed and repugnant mission to Bath, to interview M. de Villecresne on a money matter connected with his wife, he had found the profligate very much of an invalid. He had recovered, it was true, and returned to France, but he was ill again now—how seriously Aymar was not sure. Avoye would tell him when he got to Sessignes.

He had something to tell her too—this new plan which he had just made with M. du Tremblay, for (except his love, of which he was very chary in speaking to her) there was little in his life that she did not share. She was, in thought, the comrade of all his hopes and enterprises—had once been a comrade in deed also. But for that he had scolded her.

(3)

The towers of Sessignes came at last into view—Sessignes, Sept-Cygnés, the castle of the Seven Swans emblazoned on the La Rocheterie shield. Little remained now of the feudal stronghold which the first Aymar de la Rocheterie had built in the days of Philip Augustus, yet the château's very position hinted at a warrior's eye. A later and softer generation would have planted it, not on the scarp, but lower down where the pastures sloped to the Aven, loitering here by banks of meadowsweet.

"Madame is well, Monsieur Aymar; but Mme la Comtesse was summoned away about four days ago to M. de Villecresne, who is very ill," said the old, tremulously smiling manservant in response to his master's enquiries about the family.

Summoned away! She was not here! But the shock of that disappointment was succeeded by the thought, "De Villecresne must be at the point of death; she would never have gone to him else." Aymar's heart beat so fast that for the moment he hardly heard what the old man was saying further. But he mechanically took the letter which he was holding out, and saw that it was addressed in the hand of his second-in-command, M. de Fresne.

"How did this come here, Célestin?" he asked in some surprise.

"One of your *gars* brought it, Monsieur le Vicomte, this morning, from the Bois des Fauvettes."

"He is still here?"

"No, Monsieur Aymar. He went back at once."

L'Oiseleur tore open the missive all the more hastily that he was expecting nothing from that quarter. It contained a few words to say that as the looked-for ammunition had arrived earlier than was anticipated M. de Fresne was, in accordance with his leader's known intentions, going to move the 'Eperviers' over the river at once, leaving their encampment in the Bois des Fauvettes at sunrise on Friday. He should expect in that case to be across the Pont-aux-Rochers by eight in the morning. It did not, he concluded, seem necessary or even prudent (having regard to the reinforcements just received by the Bonapartists at Arbelles) to wait for La Rocheterie's return in person, especially as its exact hour was uncertain; but, knowing that he intended to pass

by Sessignes, he was sending this information there, so that his leader should not attempt to go all the way back to the Bois des Fauvettes, but could rejoin his force at some nearer point.

Portions of this brief epistle were in cipher, but Aymar knew his own cipher so well that he could read it off. The result rather annoyed him. To-morrow was Friday; why could not de Fresne wait for his return? . . . He was just going to put the letter in his pocket, when he stopped, and, frugal of gestures though he was, smote his forehead. "Dieu! why had I not this letter at noon at Keraven?" If only he had known then that the ammunition had arrived, and that he could, in consequence, safely move his men across the river, he would certainly have concluded that tempting arrangement with Saint-Etienne. There seemed a sort of grin of Fortune in sending the news now—just too late.

But was it too late? Letter in hand, he sat down under his young father's portrait and thought rapidly. He would have to ride back instantly to the *Abeille d'Or*, arrange with Saint-Etienne, send one of Saint-Etienne's men to warn de Fresne—or better still, go himself—and then somehow despatch information of de Fresne's movements to the Bonapartists at Saint-Goazec.

Yes, but how was he going to do that plausibly? There lay the difficulty, as that shrewd old M. du Parc had pointed out. One of Saint-Etienne's men would have to play the supposed traitor. He might pretend, for instance, to have stolen this very letter, and to be desirous of selling it to the enemy . . . as M. du Parc had advised.

Sarrasin, the great wolf-hound, stared up at him anxiously as he leant forward, his elbows on his knees.—No, it would not do. The Imperialists could not be lured to Pont-aux-Rochers in the time. There would be two cats at the bridge, but no mouse. Because, even if he started this instant to ride back to Keraven he could not get there much before eleven at night, and, allowing an hour to thrash out the matter thoroughly with his friend, and to coach up the supposedly traitorous emissary, the latter could not reach Colonel Richard at Saint-Goazec before six in the morning, which would be too late.

L'Oiseleur got up rather sadly . . . and then stood still. For suppose the letter was sent to the enemy, not from Keraven at all, but directly and now from Sessignes itself, which was so much nearer—though he had small idea to whom to entrust

it. It would reach the Imperialist commander this evening, in about two hours in fact. Meanwhile he himself would be half-way back to Saint-Etienne, who had ample time in any event to get to Pont-aux-Rochers before the enemy.

And by this plan Aymar was really tempted. It had just that spice of daring which appealed to him, and he began to walk up and down the hall considering it. But in a moment he saw that it would be difficult to make such a sending plausible—doubly, trebly so as in this case the letter *must* come directly from himself. And it was exactly that coming from himself which his keen sense of personal honour could not stomach. He had an innate aversion to even the semblance of treachery—to even the appearance of such a horrible thing as the betrayal of his own men.

He thrust de Fresne's letter resolutely into his pocket and went to find his grandmother. Had Avoye gone to her husband because release was near?

The silver swans of La Rocheterie, with the golden crowns round their necks, sailed without progress on the azure of the shield above his grandmother's head, where she sat by the hearth in the salon, slim and upright, a book on her knee. She had been a very pretty girl—and not, it really seemed, so long ago.

She exclaimed with surprise and pleasure as her grandson appeared at the door, since, though she had sometimes a very captious method of showing—or cloaking—her affection for him, and often took a malicious joy in combating him, at bottom she adored him—fiercely. For the victory which, at one-and-twenty, his will had won over hers in the matter of his cousin, she bore him no grudge. The grudge was against Avoye, who had 'spoilt his life,' keeping him, the last of his line, unmarried, when (especially since the Moulin Brûlé and the rest had added a romantic prestige to his personal attractions and the fact of his ancient lineage) he might, she felt, have carried off any heiress in France.

"So you have left your beloved 'Eperviers' to see an old woman!" she said, as he kissed her unwrinkled and still delicately coloured cheek. "But more probably it was to see a young one. . . . She is away, though—as you have doubtless ascertained already."

"Célestin told me," replied Aymar, a trifle stonily. "He also told me where she had gone."

Mme de la Rocheterie looked at him, and then dropped her expressive eyes. "But, since he did not know it himself,

he could not calm your agitation by telling you that I expect her back to-night. I almost thought she would have been here by now."

A flush rose in Aymar's cheek. Conscious of it, he turned away and rested his spurred foot on the hearthstone, his hand above him on the mantel. "And . . . de Villecresne?" he asked after a moment.

Mme de la Rocheterie breathed a decorous sigh. "Poor Avoye, poor child! She writes sad news."

"What, is he better?" exclaimed the young man.

"Aymar, think what you are saying!" But her mouth twitched with appreciation. "On the contrary, she was too late. The Comte de Villecresne died about three hours before she got there."

L'Oiseleur drew a sharp breath, and, putting his other hand on the high mantel, bowed his head between his arms. His face was quite invisible, but there was no superfluity of colour in it now. After a moment's complete silence he gave a sound which might or might not have been a laugh.

"What did you say?" demanded Mme de la Rocheterie.

"I? Nothing," he responded, without moving. "But what I should like to say is, For whom in the world is the news of de Villecresne's death bad news?"

"Possibly for his creditors," said his grandmother dryly. "I suppose that you have some idea of their number, since your visit to him. . . . We sup in a quarter of an hour, Aymar."

No meal in his life had seemed so interminable to the young man as that of which he partook that evening with the old woman who had brought him up, whose jealous, half-tormenting affection was perfectly aware that his whole soul was full of the news she had just given him, the news he had waited years to hear, and that his ears were straining all the time for the sound of wheels . . . and who would not so much as glance at the subject of Avoye's release, nor make even the slightest further reference to her return.

But she talked of politics—and he had to attend and reply of the coming struggle in the West—and he had to give his opinion of the small movements which had already taken place: of the shock given to the countryside by the Bonapartists' summary execution of a woman spy, a peasant, a few days ago. "A foolish shock," was Mme de la Rocheterie's comment. "Marie Lasserre knew what she was risking. And

I do not approve, in any case, of women aping men and usurping their rôles. If they do, they should at least be prepared to pay the same penalty."

No doubt she was hoping to get up an argument on the subject of Avoye's exploit at Chalais, which had been so much talked about since the Restoration. But Aymar did not accept the challenge. And, having endured various thrusts at his want of appetite (which he hoped he had disguised) he was able at last to escape from the table and the candles and the necessity of answering coherently, to the place where a lover should carry his rapture—under the open sky and the stars. And he went across the grass of the rose-garden where, late as it was, a peacock was parading, past the sundial and into the orchard, and leant against a tree there. Truly his happiness was almost more than he could bear. And he had waited so long for it—it seemed a lifetime. It *was* his lifetime. . . .

(4)

He raised his head at last. Through the apple boughs the stars peered, laughing, and there was, as there should be, the fairy boat of the young moon low in the west. It was indeed a night for her to come to him, as any moment now she might come. She too should look at the stars between the lattice-roof of blossoms—blossom and star herself.

Nothing between them any more! that evil shadow which had made a mockery of her life gone for ever! Aymar could scarcely believe it yet, but his heart so ached with the almost intolerable joy of the thought that the strange, sweet pain seemed to seal it as true. He reached up to the tree under which he stood, and broke off a little bough with its pink-flushed blossoms, pale now in the starlight. The branch was tough; he had to tug it, and as he tugged he felt something give round his left arm. He knew what it was—that absurd talisman of his.

He put the apple blossom to his face and kissed it, as he would kiss Avoye when he gave it to her. Perhaps these moments . . . and still more, those that were coming . . . were worth, after all, their heavy toll of endurance and restraint, the meetings that were only pain, the partings whose full sorrow might not be tasted, the enforced absences, the perpetual struggle to be content with a little for fear of losing all. But struggle was over now, and

he could lay at her feet a heart as clean as his sword.

The peacock's jarring note roused him, and he remembered that the *jartier* was broken on his arm. Avoye should weave him a new one—but not to-night. Early in the morning he would get rushes from the river, and before he rode away she should plait him another bracelet and fasten it on . . . if indeed it were necessary to continue this farce nowadays. He never had to show that he carried on his person the earnest of his good fortune and his prestige. But he must not let the broken charm be found; and, putting down the apple blossom, he shook the twist of rushes down his sleeve and drew it out. Strange that it had broken like that, when it had survived much more strenuous doings!

He was fingering it when he became aware of galloping hoofs in the distance. His heart galloped too—Avoye at last! No—it was a single horse, a saddle horse; and it was coming along the little-used bridle-path that led by the river and almost passed the orchard where he was. Who on earth could it be? He went across the orchard and vaulted the gate, and saw that the horseman, riding as a tired and heavy man rides, had abandoned the path, and was making for the same point. He must be coming to the château—must know the way well too . . .

"Who is it?" Aymar called out.

"Is that you, La Rocheterie?" returned a voice full of relief. "Thank God, thank God! I did not know you were at Sessignes. I have brought the most terrible news!—Wait a moment."

He climbed stiffly out of the saddle. It was the Marquis de Vaubernier, a neighbour and old friend of the family—Avoye's godfather, in fact. He now came up to the young man, wrenched out of his ecstasy of a moment ago into what he imagined to be tidings of some military mishap, and said, "Your cousin Avoye is in the hands of the Bonapartists at Saint-Goazec, and—Oh, my God, I can hardly believe it yet—they intend to shoot her to-morrow morning!"

"Nonsense!" said Aymar sharply . . . but the world went black. "Impossible!" he repeated after a moment. "Marquis, you are dreaming! What in Heaven's name should they do that for?"

"Because you allowed her to obtain that information for you," retorted the old man, tears in his voice. "Because they suspect her—unjustly this time. They have her in custody at the *Cheval Blanc* just outside Saint-Goazec. And they

will do it—I have seen their colonel. Have you not heard about Marie Lasserre?”

Aymar stood in the starlight as if he had been shot himself, so still that the old Marquis, wringing his hands, exclaimed, “Good God, man, can’t you speak! There’s no time to wool-gather! And find me some place to sit down—I’m dead with fatigue!”

“If what you tell me is true,” said Aymar in a very quiet voice, “I will go and give myself up in her place, of course. But I must know a little more first.” He opened the orchard gate. “Come up to the seat in the rose-garden. I will not take you into the house. There is no need to tell my grandmother.”

And in the rose-garden, sitting on a stone bench, to the accompaniment of the discordant cries of the peacock, incoherently but convincingly the Marquis de Vaubernier told his tale.

He had been out riding when he heard that a lady travelling with her maid had been detained by the Imperialist troops near Saint-Goazec; the replies to his queries convinced him that the lady in question was Mme de Villecresne, of whose recent journey he was aware; and, becoming very uneasy, because, as he confessed, he could not help wondering if they knew of her former ‘exploit’ at Chalais, he went to the *Cheval Blanc*, where she was detained, and succeeded in seeing the senior officer there. The Bonapartist’s curtness and obvious unwillingness to speak of the matter alarmed the nervous old man still more, and when the officer began, in his turn, to question him about the lady, his chief desire was to get away, lest, as he said now, “I should let slip something indiscreet about her.

“And then, La Rocheterie, just as I was going to mount, a young officer who had been in the room came up to me and said, very gravely, ‘It does not matter what questions you answer or do not answer, Monsieur, about that unfortunate lady—nothing can make any difference now.’ When I asked him what, in Heaven’s name, he meant, he said in a very low voice, looking, as I could see, as if he could hardly bring himself to tell me, ‘Her fate is fixed; she cannot be allowed to go free. *We know too much about her.*’ And when, God help me, I still did not take in the full horror of what he was saying to me, he whispered, ‘Another Marie Lasserre!’

“Then, Aymar, I did understand, and I frantically caught his arm, and said I would go back instantly and see their

commander again. The young man said, 'Useless! We, his officers, have all remonstrated. Yet we have not quite given up hope, though one must say that, but for a miracle, she will be shot to-morrow morning. A spy is a spy, even though she be of noble birth.' Then, hardly knowing what I did, I said I must see *her* at once; but he declared that it was out of the question, and that he himself would be cashiered if it was known that he had even told me about it; that all I could do now for her was to go home and pray. . . . So I did not see the child—I came straight here, riding as I have not ridden for twenty years. And at least *you* are here. . . ."

Aymar had stood rigid before him, his hands gripping each other behind his back. Now he said thickly, "Marquis, it must be a mistake."

"Whose mistake?" asked the old man. "Not mine! I wish it were! I tell you the colonel's manner was most sinister, and when that young officer held my stirrup for me I saw the tears in his eyes."

"But perhaps it is not Avoye at all?"

"They spoke of her by name. Besides, I saw her carriage in the yard—one of yours."

"But—but it is an incredible thing to do!" said Aymar, as one speaking in a nightmare.

"That is what everybody said about Marie Lasserre . . . but they did it. . . . Oh, Avoye, my little Avoye!" He began to break down. L'Oiseleur walked away to the sundial.

When, after a few moments, the old man followed him there, Aymar was slowly tracing out the figures on its metal plate, cold with dew. "What are you doing, La Rocheterie?" he exclaimed, seizing him by the shoulder. "It is your fault that she is in danger!—There's no time to lose. . . . Think of something, for pity's sake!"

"For pity's sake, be quiet then!" flashed out the young man. "Cannot you see that I am trying to think of some way? Do you suppose that I do not want to save her a thousand times more than you do—that I would not give every drop of blood in my body to spare her a pinprick—that I would not get on your horse this instant and ride to Saint-Goazec and give myself up . . . if I could!"

The passion in his voice silenced the Marquis de Vaubernier, and he went off to the other side of the lawn. And Avoye's lover, his elbows on the sundial, his clenched fists pressed to his head, was fighting hard against the almost overwhelming impulse to do what he had said—fighting

because it did not seem to him consistent with his honour and his obligations. Was he not bound to du Tremblay by their joint scheme (more his, indeed, in conception than the other's), did he not know that his own men were useless for any enterprise requiring foresight without his leadership—that de Fresne knew nothing of the fresh arrangements, and that without seeing him it would be very difficult to ensure his grasping his part in them? No, if he surrendered himself to this Colonel Richard, as he longed to do, though for him it would only mean prison and inactivity (for of shooting him there could be no question) he was making the enemy a present not only of himself, but of his small yet valuable force as well, stultifying his comrade's plans—in short, deserting his post. And yet it would have been so sure, so easy; to have him, L'Oiseleur, in their hands, they would certainly open the door of the cage to any woman, were she ten times a spy.

But if honour forbade him to surrender himself, what could he do instead? Try to rescue her? Almost impossible, single-handed. None of the servants would be of any use. If he had Eveno, or a couple of his best men . . . but even the Chouan who had brought de Fresne's letter had gone back. . . .

The blood leapt to Aymar's face. Why, he had the way to save Avoye in his very hands after all! He had only to utilise the scheme almost completed that noon with Saint-Etienne—almost entered upon on his own initiative when he found de Fresne's news. He had only to strike a bargain before the information—the letter—was given up; and the very fact that he had now a bargain to strike lent infinitely more colour to the genuineness of the whole affair. In fact, Avoye's danger gave him the pretext which had been wanting. He might not only save her, but snatch also the military success which had so tempted him. Had he not already contemplated the sending of that letter with nothing but that success to gain by it? And, since Saint-Etienne and his regiment were so much nearer Pont-aux-Rochers than the Bonapartists were, there was no more risk than before: if he sent the letter at once, from Sessignes, he still had ample time to ride back to the *Abeille d'Or* and complete the arrangements.

He snatched his subordinate's letter out of his pocket. Vaubernier, of course, must take it; he could not. The striking of the bargain—no easy task—must be entrusted to that agitated old gentleman; but again there was no help

for it. His very agitation ought at least to convince the Imperialist commander of the genuineness of the motive behind the sending of the information. And though the scheme was less sure than the one he longed to adopt—that of paying for his love's freedom with his own—yet, if this Colonel Richard should suspect the existence of a trap somewhere, so long as he was ignorant of Saint-Etienne's presence at Keraven he could not possibly know in what the trap consisted. And surely the chance—however much he recognised it to be merely a chance—of crushing a very obnoxious enemy was worth more than the gratification of shooting a woman.

With the letter in his hand L'Oiseleur looked across the dim garden at Vaubernier, considering what instructions he should give him in order to convince Colonel Richard. And then it slid into his mind, more than a little dizzied by the violent transition from rapture to horror, that he was going deliberately to commit the very act on account of which he had a few hours earlier rejected an alluring scheme. He was sending the letter himself. In other words, he was about to sell information—and information about his own men—in order to save a kinswoman's life. . . . At least, that was how his action would appear to Colonel Richard—how he must pray indeed that it would appear. . . .

The spring night seemed suddenly very cold. Was he really going to lay at an enemy's feet the most precious thing he had—his untarnished honour? For Avoye's sake, yes . . . till the day came. When the Imperialists fell into the joint trap prepared for them he would be abundantly cleared.

He went over the lawn.

"Monsieur de Vaubernier, do you mind what figure you cut in this business—not but what I am reserving the least reputable for myself?"

"With Avoye's life at stake!" said the Marquis tremulously. "No, you can make of me what you will."

Aymar looked hard at him. Obviously it would really be more convincing that Vaubernier should pretend to have stolen the letter from him, or something of the kind, and should affect to be the person really responsible. . . . No, in spite of his willingness, he could not let him brand himself as a traitor—an old man like that—for the ensuing military coup would hardly clear him, who had no part in it, as it would L'Oiseleur.

"I only want you to be an intermediary," he said firmly. "I propose, Marquis, that you shall strike a bargain with

Colonel Richard for my cousin's safety with this letter, which contains important information about the movements of my force to-morrow. It is a letter which I have only just received from my second-in-command. You must assure Colonel Richard that it is genuine, that you have had it straight from me . . . and if he wishes to know how I could bring myself to do such a thing, you must lay stress on the fact that Mme de Villecresne is my cousin. You must not give him the letter till he promises to let Avoys go; it would be better if you could contrive not to interview him with it on you. . . . But I do not ask you to take any responsibility; all that rests on me. You are merely a go-between."

"I understand," said the old gentleman. "And I understand, also, of course, that you intend——"

"You had better understand nothing of the kind," put in Aymar quickly. "Colonel Richard will question you; you must know nothing—*nothing*—but that I am horribly concerned for Mme de Villecresne's safety—which God knows is true enough!—and you will be prepared to swear that the information is genuine, for I have told you so, on the word of a gentleman."

And, even as he said it, he wondered how much faith Colonel Richard, when he got that letter, would put in the word of a man who could send it.

"Perhaps you had better not know, even, what is in it," he went on, looking down at it. "Indeed, unless one strikes a light, you cannot see. I think that I will seal it up. I can get into the house without being seen."

He went through the open window of the dining-room and lit a candle on the writing-table there. But first he read the letter through again, and realised that place and time, and a little besides, were unintelligible, because they were in cipher. If the letter was to be of any use as a bribe, he must with his own hand decipher these passages. And Aymar hesitated, penetrated through and through with the horrible apparent significance of what he was doing. But it *was* only apparent; it *was* only a ruse. And, if he could help it, Avoys should never know the means he was employing to save her; no more than he himself would she like the sound of it. Vaubernier must, if possible, make it a part of the bargain that she should not be told the reason for her release; he must not even see her in person lest she should guess some connection with him, Aymar. And almost more than from Avoys must what he had done for Avoys be kept from his

grandmother, who considered already, as he knew, that his cousin had spoilt his life. It was for that reason, not to spare Mme de la Rocheterie's sensibilities, that he hoped even Avoye's danger might not reach her ears. It was just conceivable that Avoye herself, on her return, might keep it from her. If she did not return. . . . But that was unthinkable!

Unthinkable or no, that nightmare thought had him in its grip as he hastily wrote in the words above the cipher. Then he sealed up the letter again with his own seal, and went back into the garden to deliver it to his messenger.

"*Sans tache*," he said to himself as he went. "Oh, Avoye, my darling!"

"Ah, here you are at last!" said his grandmother, laying down her book. "I was just thinking how delightful it must be to be young and not to dread the dew. But I fear that we shall not welcome Avoye to-night now."

"No, I do not think that she will come to-night," answered Aymar without looking at her. "And, if she does . . . I shall not see her, for I must rejoin my men without a moment's delay. I have come to take leave of you, Grand'mère; Hirondelle is at the door."

"What!" exclaimed Mme de la Rocheterie. "Is there anything wrong?" But she saw in an instant that there was; at least, that he was holding down some very strong emotion. And he was in uniform again.

"I hope not. Not if I go back at once. Good-bye, Grand'mère." He took her hand and lifted it to his cold lips.

"But, Aymar," she said, roused to real concern, "you have been in the saddle all day—you ate no supper. You cannot ride straight back to the Bois des Fauvettes—you will kill yourself!"

"I trust not to go as far as that," he answered. "When—when Avoye comes, tell her I had to go."

"That is a pity," said the old lady, suddenly moved with sympathy; he looked so horribly pale and drawn. "I hope, mon fils, that your bad news is unfounded?"

"I hope so too," said Aymar, and was gone from the room.

And when his grandmother, her book on her knee, heard Sarrasin's dismal howling in the hall, she knew that he was gone from Sessignes altogether.

(5)

The April night, its scents and caressing breeze, meant little enough now to Aymar de la Rocheterie as Hirondelle carried him away at a smart pace from Sessignes—and further from Avoye too. That was the hardest thing of all, to ride off and leave his love's fate in the not very capable hands of the Marquis de Vaubernier—so hard that when the young man had gone a quarter of a mile along the road to Keraven, he suddenly reined up the bay mare and turned her half round. But no—it was done now; nothing, not even an appeal from Avoye herself, could make it other than infamous to go back. He had given the lives of his men into Colonel Richard's hands until such time as he himself completed his arrangements with Saint-Etienne. L'Oiseleur set his teeth and pushed the mare forward.

Waves of agonising fear for Avoye broke over him every now and then; and if they ebbed, it was only to be succeeded by a cold tide of distaste at what he had done. Oh, if only he could have offered himself in exchange, instead of engaging on this tortuous and insecure path of outwitting the enemy! But to give himself up would not be honourable; it would not really be the *beau geste* of which it might perhaps wear the semblance . . . even as what he had done instead was not really vile, as it appeared. Yet he *had* branded his own stainless name, though it were but for a few hours. What if the blot did not wash off so easily as he had told himself? A ruse . . . yes, but one with a bargain involved. . . . Moreover, he was undoubtedly trying to trick the Imperialists into giving him something for nothing. It galled Aymar's fastidiousness, that idea. But surely Colonel Richard, a soldier himself, would recognise the proceeding as a move in a game. Aymar had not guaranteed that the 'Eperviers' would be waiting at Pont-aux-Rochers for the Bonapartists to snap up; he had only guaranteed that that was what was planned. It was a contest as to which could outwit the other. If only so much did not depend on how Vaubernier conducted the negotiations!

To ride fast was a relief, yet it surprised Aymar to find how quickly he had covered half the distance back to Keraven. It was not yet one o'clock in the morning. All the better. He had met the river again, left it, and was going in the shadow of a wood when he heard a distant shot. And, as he pulled up to listen, the thought struck him for the first time, Suppose

I fell into an enemy patrol and was captured—what of de Fresne at Pont-aux-Rochers then?

The idea turned him cold. How could he have been such a fool as to think that there was no risk about this business? Till he was actually at Keraven the whole scheme, all his men's lives, rested on his shoulders alone. Nervousness about his own personal safety was a feeling which Aymar de la Rocheterie had never tasted in his life; but he tasted it thenceforward all the way to Keraven, and it had not a pleasant savour.

The spire of the village church at last, standing up in the light of dawn. He was here, unmolested, and drew his breath more freely. Then he opened his cloak as he rode, to show his uniform for the benefit of Saint-Etienne's sentries.

But there were no sentries in Keraven.

So soundly did the village sleep that not a window was raised as Hironnelle's hoofs clattered on the cobbles of the *place*. And for centuries her rider sat her there, under the church tower, motionless and asleep himself—was he not?—in some cold and evil dream. Then the clock above him struck the hour of three, and he knew that he had not the fortune to be dreaming. Saint-Etienne's force, on which his whole plan turned, and which was to have been at Keraven till Sunday, had gone.

A few minutes later, bending from the saddle, L'Oiseleur was hammering frantically on the door of the *Abeille d'Or*. A night-capped head—the host's—came forth from a window. "How long has M. de Saint-Etienne's regiment been gone?"

"They left about four o'clock yesterday afternoon, Monsieur; a despatch came ordering them off to Allonnes, without delay. I will come down and open the door, Monsieur de la Rocheterie."

Allonnes! It was hopeless to contemplate their co-operation at that distance. They had been gone eleven hours—ordered off not long after his own departure yesterday. And Saint-Etienne had seemed so certain of remaining! Still a little stunned, Aymar watched Hironnelle trying to eat the honeysuckle on the trellis, and thought of the words used in this place only yesterday about the cats and the mouse. Who was going to be the mouse now?

He pulled himself together. Though there could be no triumphant coup for him, there need be no disaster. Having allowed plenty of time for Saint-Etienne's infantry to get to

Pont-aux-Rochers before Colonel Richard could possibly reach it, he naturally had ample time to ride beyond it himself.

"Get me a glass of wine and a crust," he said hurriedly as the host emerged half-dressed, "and tell me, have you that English horse of yours? I want him saddled at once, then—no, I'll do it myself while you fetch me the wine. I shall do better to have a fresh horse, for I must ride like the devil now to the cross-roads on the other side of Pont-aux-Rochers."

"Pont-aux-Rochers?" said the innkeeper. "Then you will be better advised, Monsieur le Vicomte, to make a detour by Plélan and cross at the ford, for the Blues' patrols may very well be out in strength on the other road. I am not sure of it, but there were rumours last night."

Aymar remembered the shot in the night. He could not afford to meet any patrols. "I will go round by Plélan then—but even so I can do it," he added to himself. "Quick, the stable key!"

Yes, he could easily do it, even by the longer route. He kept assuring himself of that over and over again, as the English horse carried him down the way by the ravine at a pace little short of dangerous.

Who could have foreseen this horrible trick of Fate? Or had he been incredibly rash in staking so much on Saint-Etienne's continued presence at Keraven? Surely not, since Saint-Etienne had his orders to remain there for three days, and on that assumption they had all but completed their joint plan against the Imperialists. And, good God, even had he known that there was a possibility of the regiment's being ordered off, could he have done otherwise? Could he have left Avoye to perish, even if this scheme were hazardous?

But it was not of Avoye now that he was thinking as he galloped on under the imminent sunrise. Despite the knowledge that, with a horse like this beneath him, he could get across the river and intercept de Fresne well before the latter reached Pont-aux-Rochers, his mind was obsessed with horrible little vignettes of what would happen if by any ultimate chance he failed to do it. He tried to shut them from his mental vision, encouraging his horse, but husbanding him as a good rider can, for almost everything depended on his staying power—himself unconscious of fatigue, though he had been in the saddle, without much intermission, since ten o'clock yesterday morning.

By five o'clock he was on the Lande of Languédias, a desolate heathy patch of country, riding very hard under clouds and wind. For time, it seemed to him, was going even faster than he—or perhaps it was only that the nervous strain was beginning to tell on him. And his thoughts went faster than either. He wondered what Avoye were doing if . . . O God, not if! . . . she were alive. Yes, she *was* alive . . . free . . . he was sure of it. . . . Rather, what were they saying of him, Colonel Richard and his officers, as they marched to lie in wait at Pont-aux-Rochers, unaware that he was racing them by the other road—racing to stop what he himself had set in motion?

Racing, yes! Why had he listened to rumours about patrols and gone round—why had he been prudent against his own inclination? And he would have done better in the end, perhaps, to have kept Hironnelle, though she was not fresh. Yet this horse was going gallantly enough, though the pace was beginning to distress him; there was foam on his nostrils, and he was sweating more than he should. But de Fresne would probably be rather after than before his time; he would not leave the Bois des Fauvettes before sunrise, and there was always delay about getting the men on the move. . . . It *could* not be that he should arrive too late; he had only about eight miles to the ford now, and three beyond, and he could still get that much out of the inn-keeper's horse—at the cost perhaps of cruelty. He had not yet used the spur at all; he was keeping that for the end.

. . . And what if at the end he found that the Imperialists were not at Pont-aux-Rochers at all, and his men in no danger? In that case Avoye . . . but his mind, shuddering, refused the alternative. No, his men *were* in danger . . . but only, please God, in such danger as he could avert.

Aymar never was to spur the English horse. It was not more than four or five minutes after this that it put its foot in a rabbit hole and came crashing down. Its rider had just time to know what had happened, then a curtain was drawn over everything.

Later, he gripped the heather and pulled himself to an elbow, sick and giddy. He had been flung clear. But a glance showed him that his horse's neck was broken. He sank back again; the fall had been so violent that probably only the springy heather in which he lay had saved him from broken limbs himself. For a moment or two he was not sure that it *had* saved him. But he sat up again; his

throbbing head in his hands. His horse was dead; if not behind time already he had little to spare; he had just lost . . . how much? and, worst of all, there were no dwellings on the Lande, or at best only a miserable cottage where it would be out of the question to procure a horse. But, somewhere, somehow, he *must* procure one! L'Oiseleur staggered to his feet, and, after standing a moment to steady himself and take his bearings, started to run stumblingly through the tangled heather towards a thread of smoke just visible about two miles away.

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"A horse!" mumbled the old man. "No, my young gentleman, no horses here! A goat or two. Horses!" He emitted a high cracked sound of mirth. "Not if you were the King of France himself!"

A bundle of rags on the other side of the hearth disclosed itself in the dim and smoky light to be a human being. "Maturin over at the quarry-pit has a horse," it said, in the voice of a woman. "He uses it for drawing up the stones—a strong beast it is."

"Where is the quarry?" exclaimed Aymar. "Quick, it's life or death."

They told him, slowly. They were not sure of the distance—two miles, four miles? . . . He tossed them a piece of gold and ran out of the hut.

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How long had he been in finding this place—out of his road as it was? He only knew that he had nearly missed it altogether. And now the quarryman was very unwilling to surrender his stockish grey steed—slow enough, as one could see, but still . . . a horse.

"I can't spare him, Monsieur, and he is not used to being ridden, and I have no saddle."

"That's not of the least consequence. Take off those traces quickly! I will give you twenty-five napoleons for him—about twice what he is worth—and if possible I will return him to you and not reclaim the money. If that does not content you, I shall take him whether you will or no."

The quarryman did not look content, but this pale, stern young officer frightened him, though he made no motion to use his arms. So he stood sulkily aside while Aymar got on to the grey's back; only, as he rode off, he shouted *Thief!*

after him, and threw a few stones before he sat down to recount the money.

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Of all tortures, to ride a slow horse when the very heaven and earth depended on its speed! Once or twice Aymar thought of abandoning it and taking to his own legs again, but by spurring the grey without mercy he did get out of it a certain measure of progress. And there was his own bodily fatigue, which he could no longer disregard, to reckon with also. Oh for half an hour of *Hirondelle*! But even *Hirondelle* could not get him there in time now.

The ford over the Aven at last! All that shining water had come down from Pont-aux-Rochers. What had it seen there?

The grey did not like it; he refused to enter. Twice Aymar lashed and spurred him; then, desperate, he jumped off, and, in water himself to mid-thigh, tugged him over. It had meant fresh delay, but nothing short of a miracle could save the *Eperviers* now. Ironically, the quarryman's horse went better after the contest. But all the last three miles his rider's mind seemed to revolve round one word. Nothing but a miracle . . . a miracle. . . . O God, send a miracle! . . .

At the cross-roads, not a sign. Had they passed or no? A little way off in a field, a girl was herding goats. He called to her.

"Yes, Monsieur, some *Chouans*—a great many—went by about an hour ago. There has been firing since. They went along there—towards the bridge."

Without a word Aymar set spurs to his horse. There had been no miracle. But at least he might be in time to die with them.

Even that was denied him. A mile or so farther along the road turned sharply to the left; and here, where it was wide and tree-shadowed, and had a spacious grassy margin on one side, he saw the first fugitives of all. There were perhaps a dozen; they ran past him in twos and threes, panic-pursued. Not one had a visible wound. They had just run . . . his men.

He did not try to stay them, for even in that hasty passing he had seen that they were his newer, his least reliable recruits. Then he came on one fallen by the roadside, with another bending over him. For an instant he pulled up.

"What has happened at the bridge?" he asked, but his voice stuck in his throat, for he knew.

"It was a cursed trap!" answered the man, panting. He did not look up. "The Blues . . . ambushed there . . . they have made mincemeat of us. . . . See, Yannik, if I tie this round your leg you could get on farther."

"O God!" said L'Oiseleur, and rode on—rode on blindly to see more men running under the trees on either side, to hear himself at last called by name, to find himself then in the midst of a small body retreating with some semblance of order, and clutching his bridle convulsively and looking up at him with wild eyes, his youngest officer, Clément de Soulanges, a boy of twenty—to hear him crying out of the clamour, "La Rocheterie, La Rocheterie, why were you not with us? It was awful . . . I have got away what I could . . . and I think Magloire Le Bihan has got more . . . he had the rearguard . . . but all the rest——"

"De Fresne?"

"Killed, I think. I saw him go down. The Imperialists were all posted there—they must have known!" And he half broke into a sob. "Oh, L'Oiseleur, L'Oiseleur . . . !"

"We will go back to the bridge," said Aymar, turning his ghastly face away. "My children——"

A man suddenly scrambled down the high bank into the road, a huge Breton, breathless and bloodstained. "I saw you, L'Oiseleur, from the field. We are making for the forest again. You have heard what happened? God's truth, if we could find the man who did it! My nephew lies there . . ."

"We will go back and avengè him," said Aymar quickly. "How many men have you over there, Magloire? Bring them into the road. Have they all their muskets?"

"Go back!" ejaculated the giant. "You are mad, Monsieur le Vicomte! After the trouble we have had in getting away as many as we have! The place is a shambles, more or less!"

"Magloire is right," said young de Soulanges. "You were not there. Believe me, it is of no use! The front ranks were eaten up—those that were not killed. Besides," he added, sinking his voice and pulling with a bleeding hand at his leader's arm, so that L'Oiseleur bent his head, "besides, I doubt if you could get them to follow you!"

And looking round the men whose moods he knew so well, L'Oiseleur saw that this was probably true. It would have

been a terrible blow, had he been capable of feeling it.

"Very well," he said between his teeth, "then I shall go alone. Stand back, please!"

The boy clung all the tighter. "La Rocheterie, you are our only hope! Don't desert us! Oh, don't do that! It is suicide . . . and to what purpose?"

To what purpose, indeed! Aymar tried to loosen the bleeding fingers. De Soulanges clasped his boot.

"You will only get yourself captured, La Rocheterie," he sobbed, "and what good will that do?"

Captured! That was the last thing Aymar intended—and by Colonel Richard too. . . The fugitives, hearing the altercation, were pressing closely round his horse now, supplicating like children that he should not abandon them. And he saw Magloire's face of blank amazement as he turned suddenly round and heard.

Well, he could always do it later on by his own hand. Aymar made a supreme effort, and, rallying all his faculties, began to issue orders as quickly and clearly as if, in the last few minutes, the whole of life had not gone sliding down to ruin.

And somehow he got them back, straggling and disheartened remnant that they were—ninety odd out of five hundred men—to their old quarters in the Bois des Fauvettes, where for the present they would be safe, and where (almost more important still) they felt that they were safe. And there they lifted him, stiff and spent, from his horse—L'Oiseleur, who had heard of the ambush and had nearly killed himself in riding to warn them of it, L'Oiseleur, who was so terribly distressed at what had befallen their comrades, but who, at least, was with them again. Could they do too much for him?

Their simple care for him was the final sword-thrust; and when, having dragged himself into the deserted little woodcutter's hut which was his own old headquarters, it became apparent that his right arm and shoulder were by this time temporarily useless from his fall, and Clément de Soulanges, wounded as he was himself, had insisted on rubbing them for him, it had been all Aymar could do to refrain from putting one of his pistols into the boy's hand and saying, "If you want to do something for me, use *that*!"

But soon he was too utterly exhausted for remorse or horror or any other emotion to play on him longer. He threw

himself down on his couch of bracken and sleep descended like a pall. The long day was over.

(6)

But there was a waking—only too early. And by five o'clock next morning, when Aymar, very drawn but composed, was giving orders to young de Soulanges, he had already lived through years of torment. He was despatching Clément to warn du Tremblay of the disaster, and to tell him that in consequence he must not count on the support of the 'Eperviers.' And he had further ordered Clément—much to the latter's dismay—not to return to him, but to remain with du Tremblay.

"For I shall probably have to disband this remnant before you can get back," he said. "You see that, Clément, don't you?"

"Yes," said the boy miserably. And as he stood with bent head, fumbling with the bandage round his fingers, he added, "Am I to tell M. du Tremblay that there was probably treachery at the bridge?"

L'Oiseleur turned his head away. "You can tell him . . . that it looked like it," he answered after a moment.

When Clément was gone he sat down at the little table in the hut and covered his face. He had chosen de Soulanges to carry that bitter but unavoidable message because he was fond of him, and wanted to get him out of the way before he took his pistol in his own hand, or before the inevitable consequences of the disaster came on him from without. For, safe as his remaining men might consider themselves in the Bois des Fauvettes, Aymar knew better. In a day or two the Bonapartists at Arbelles, hearing of the affair at the bridge, would certainly follow up their comrades' success and clear out the relics of that nest of hornets in the wood. And, if he himself had not blown out his brains before that happened, he could then die sword in hand, which would be preferable. So either he must disband his men in time, or make a last stand.

Yet, now that he had heard fuller details, he knew that the affair had not been so actually bloody as he had at first been given to understand. The trap had been so well set that, after the first discharge from the hidden foe—and in particular after M. de Fresne had been seen to fall—the leaderless front ranks had been obliged to surrender. But

they comprised his best, his oldest followers; it was the least devoted, the least trustworthy who, being in the rear,^f had escaped, and these would be all the harder to get in hand again. Moreover, worn out though he had been by the close of yesterday, it was clear to Aymar that the ambitious hopes of the big Breton, Magloire Le Bihan, which for some time he had suspected, had vastly grown during his few days' absence, and were likely to swell still more, now that he found himself virtually second-in-command. Aymar's very soul was sick as he got up and went out to inspect his men's depleted equipment—so sick that something whispered to him, 'Why not tell them that it is you, and you alone, who brought about the catastrophe?' But in that case reorganisation would be hopeless.

He did not sleep at all that night, and he knew that under the strain of his paralysing secret he was beginning to lose his faculty of decision. Some of the men were slipping away already. On the other hand there was no sign of an attack on the wood. He knew that the Imperialists had always credited him with more followers than he actually possessed. If they were hesitating on that score he could still keep their communications cut a little longer by stopping where he was. Magloire supported this idea.

So all Sunday he did his best to reorganise the handful that was left to him.

About nine o'clock a letter was brought to him. The handwriting was Avoys's . . . and Avoys seemed now to have receded into another world, and that hour in the orchard to belong to a life not this. Since his return to the wood the thought that he had saved her (as presumably he had) at the cost of other men's blood—men sent blindly to the slaughter—was so terrible that he had not been able to face it. Now here was a letter from her.

He went into the hut and opened it with unsteady hands. It was from Sessignes, and dated April 28th—Friday. So she was safe—had returned unharmed. But did he not know that by what had been paid for her return? He read:

"Oh, my dearest, to have missed you, and at such a time! And by so little, as it were! I could have arrived last night, though late, had I but known that you were at Sessignes. If only I had! For though I was stopped at the 'Cheval Blanc' at six o'clock yesterday evening by a body of Bonapartists, and detained there for a few hours (on account, I believe,

of the movement of troops) at ten o'clock I was told, very civilly, that I could continue my journey if I wished."

Aymar stopped reading, and leant dizzily against the wall of the hut. Was he going crazy? She 'would have arrived had she but known'! At ten o'clock, when Vaubernier was still in the rose-garden at Sessignes, she had been told 'very civilly' that she was free to proceed—she who was to have been shot in the morning! . . . He read on to the end, the letters dancing before his eyes.

"As it was, seeing that it was already late, and that I was tired, and since I had Agathe with me, and was quite unmolested by the officers at the inn (having in fact kept my room all evening) I decided, unfortunately, to spend the night at the 'Cheval Blanc' and proceed early next morning. But this morning I was told with equal civility, but quite firmly, that I could not do so for the moment, and it was not till about four in the afternoon that I was allowed to go on. (I suppose that troops may have been on the march again, but what movement I did hear was at daybreak.)"

"And then I got home, and heard that you had been here last night and had gone again—gone suddenly, having received bad news. It seems as though Fate were determined that we should not meet yesterday, and that I should not tell you myself the news which (though I have prayed and do pray for him, Aymar) I am not hypocrite enough to pretend was anything of a grief to me. But I will not write any more about it; I cannot. Shall I not see you soon?"

". . . That is, if all is well with you and your men? I do not like what Grand'mère told me of your departure. It seems to me that my anxiety for you weighs heavier—now. Send me a line to allay it! Oh, why could we not have met yesterday! God keep you!"

Why could we not have met! Aymar staggered over to a chair. She had never been within a hundred miles of danger—except perhaps through his own action, which appeared to have caused her a further detention. Vaubernier had then surrendered the letter without ever finding out that the peril was non-existent. No question of driving a shabby bargain with Colonel Richard; Colonel Richard had thoroughly outwitted them both—he had evidently kept Avoys until he was sure that her price had been paid. But there need never have been a price. . . . O God, there need never have

been a price at all! Some mistake . . . some terrible misunderstanding—Vaubernier's—the young officer's . . . his brain reeled . . . Vaubernier's probably. Did it matter whose? It had done its work. All the blood it had spilt was wasted; he had sent his men to death and ruined himself to no purpose whatsoever.

The shock was such that it almost deprived Aymar of the power to think, and he sat for hours at the table, the letter open before him, staring at the lantern which lit its quiet and shattering phrases, as near to madness as a healthy brain can be and yet not touch its border. When daylight came he put the letter and a pistol in his breast, and went out into the forest, so haggard that the men who saw him pass whispered that L'Oiseleur was getting stranger and stranger, that he was bewitched. . . . And this was May Day too . . . when much magic was abroad.

But perhaps it was the May morning which joined hands with Aymar's own youth to pull him out of his pit of horror and despair. And he had a strong will; for years now he had been obliged to keep a tight hold on his emotions, only his hot temper sometimes escaping his control. He lay on the shore of a lake of bluebells, and, though he lay face downwards, their scent, their multitude and their incredible colour flooded his brain like strong music. Out of this miraculous blue swamp soared the old, steadfast trees, brilliant and tender with promise. And there, after a while, Aymar resolved that this should not be the end. At twenty-six, with his past, to die by his own hand or by a self-sought death—it was a confession of complete guilt. Open confession of his partial guilt was doubtless the easier way to deal with the burden of his secret, but it could avail no one; it would almost kill . . . two women. No, he must set his teeth, and though to be with his men, suspicious indeed, but not suspicious of him, was little short of torment to a fastidious sense of honour, he must do it. If she had never been in danger it was going to be much easier also to keep from Avoye her central part in the tragedy . . . though Heaven alone knew how that part had been fastened on her. And who of his own party would believe a report of L'Oiseleur spread about by the enemy? More than all, in intention he was absolutely innocent. Never had he meant to sacrifice his men, even for Avoye. He was *not* a traitor, and, but for the most appalling ill-luck, he would not now be wearing the semblance of one.

On his way back he met Magloire Le Bihan, who asked to speak to him about the men's attitude. According to him, they were by this time demented over the question of the ambush, and were searching for a victim of their suspicions. And when Aymar observed that an ambush was within the laws of war, Magloire retorted,

"That depends which side is responsible for it. Come now, Monsieur de la Rocheterie, it is too late in the day to ignore the fact that there was treachery over Friday's business!"

Aymar measured him. "It strikes me, Magloire," he said frigidly, "that you are a little forgetting that you owe your present position to accident, and that if you do not modify your tone you will find your tenure of it exceedingly short."

A gleam of rage shot into the Breton's deep-set eyes. "Accident! Pont-aux-Rochers was an accident, was it? How was it then, Monsieur le Vicomte, that you knew of it beforehand, and rode to warn us?"

"That is my affair," returned his leader. "It is enough that I did ride to warn you; you all know why I was too late. If that is all you wish to say to me, you can go. Keep the pickets out in case of a sudden attack!"

"If that happens, I dare say we shall find that someone knew of that also beforehand," muttered Magloire darkly.

"Then you will remember that I warned you of that too," retorted Aymar. "I advise you to profit by the warning." And, turning on his heel, he left him.

Once inside the hut again he felt very tired. Two nights without sleep, three days of the most harassing remorse and strain, and now a passage of arms with his only efficient subordinate! But that Magloire, in spite of his words, had no suspicion of *him* he was certain. It was jealousy and wounded vanity which were driving him. He would have to give him his congé directly it was possible. . . .

(7)

About two o'clock he was sitting at the rough table trying to work out a map from memory (all his effects having been lost at the bridge) when he heard something like an altercation at the door. The next moment it opened to admit a man who shut it behind him and stood facing him without a

word—a lean, tallish man of about thirty-five, hard-featured and blue-eyed, and bareheaded save for a bandage round his forehead.

Aymar stared at him, amazed almost beyond speech.

“Good God! De Fresne! Then you were not——”

“I escaped—a careless sentry. No, not killed, if that is what you mean. Did you think I was?”

Aymar’s head swam for a moment. He was unfeignedly glad, but with de Fresne he would probably have to have the matter out. He sprang up, holding out his hand.

“Need I say what I feel? But you are hurt!”

“Nothing much. I was stunned for a time.” Then, glancing at his leader’s outstretched hand, the second-in-command looked him in the face. “I can take your hand, La Rocheterie; can you take mine?”

The red ran over Aymar’s features from chin to brow, and, ebbing, left him very pale. He dropped his hand. “What have you heard?”

Still looking at him very hard de Fresne put a hand inside his coat. “I have *seen* something—something I would almost give my eyes not to have seen—my own letter in the hands of the enemy! But since, in spite of it, I find you here with the men, cannot I hope that there is some mistake about it—that it was stolen . . . lost . . . mislaid, perhaps . . . and that you did not deliberately send it to Colonel Richard as he says you did?”

There was entreaty and pain in the harsh voice, and a loophole in what it said. No!

“I would rather not lie to you, de Fresne,” answered L’Oiseleur. “I . . . did send your letter to Colonel Richard. I will tell you why.”

“If you please,” said the other stiffly. “You will pardon me if I sit down.” And he walked past him to the table.

“I am sorry I have no wine to offer you,” said Aymar. “When did you last have food?”

“I need nothing, thank you.” He had spread out the letter on the table and sat back, rather haggard under his bandage. Aymar came and sat down opposite him.

“How did you get the letter back?” he asked quietly.

“Colonel Richard had me in when I was recovered, and asked me if I had really written it, and if I thought you had really sent it. I said that was inconceivable, till I . . . till I saw the deciphered passages and recognised your writing. On that I said it must have been stolen from you, and I asked

for it, and Richard let me have it—was glad, I think, to be rid of it, as if it soiled his fingers—and when I escaped . . . For God's sake, La Rocheterie, be quick and explain the business!"

"It is quite simple," answered Aymar with dry lips. "I took a risk which I see now that I ought never to have taken." And, after a moment's preparation, he embarked on the story, leaving out all reference to Mme de Villecresne, and making it appear that he had sent the letter purely as part of a ruse—as he so nearly had done. To avow, with the blood scarcely dry on the stones of Pont-aux-Rochers, that he had sent it to save her was more than he could bring himself to do. It would be dishonouring her. Yet he knew that the suppression was hazardous.

"And that is the explanation," said de Fresne slowly, at the end. "That is why I find my letter in the enemy's possession, and why there has been this horrible disaster—merely because you were tempted to bring off a coup? And that is all you have to tell me?"

"Yes, that is all," said Aymar with a slight shade of hauteur.

De Fresne suddenly pushed away his chair and rose, went to the little unglazed window and looked out, then came back and flung himself down again. Aymar watched him, sick at heart. He *knew*—or else he disbelieved.

"But there *is* more," the elder man jerked out. "There is more—you know it! Why do you keep back half, you whom I have never known to lie, when I want so much to believe you? What about that bargain with Colonel Richard?"

"I have not said anything about a bargain."

"Exactly. That is what I complain of. Because Colonel Richard did."

For the second time Aymar turned white. "What did he tell you?"

"Merely that—that you sent the letter as part of a bargain struck with him. He did not specify what the compact was. But how could any compact with the enemy be honourable? You tell me the whole thing was a ruse; perhaps the bargain was part of the ruse then—a mere pretext to make them swallow the bait? If so, of course . . ."

He looked at him questioningly. And L'Oiseleur sat silent, very pale, staring at the knots in the rough table. Since, miracle of mercy, Colonel Richard had held his tongue as to

the nature of the bargain and since, in the event (though not in intention) the bargain had proved a farce, no bargain at all, how easy to say so? But he had enough on his soul. He shook his head.

"You will not tell me what it is?" asked de Fresne.

"No. But there was nothing dishonourable in it. I got nothing——" But here he stopped.

"Then who did? There must be two parties to a bargain. Is there anyone in the world, La Rocheterie, for whom you ought to sacrifice four hundred men—and your own honour?"

Aymar winced. "I have told you, de Fresne," he said rather hotly, "that the last idea in my mind was the possibility of my men's being victims. Have I shown myself so careless of them in the past?"

De Fresne shook his bandaged head. "It looks very bad. If you refuse to say what the bargain was, it will certainly be thought to be a dishonourable one."

"I cannot help what people think. And—pardon me for referring to it—I have a certain reputation."

"Yes," agreed the older man. "Yes, that is the tragedy of it." He put his hands up to his head and sighed. "Such an unheard-of thing—to send a letter with vital information straight to the enemy. . . You have offered me an explanation which I do not doubt is true as far as it goes, but which has the most important factor left out. How can you expect it to satisfy me? My opinion, you will perhaps retort, is not of much account, but you must recognise yourself, La Rocheterie, that you are in a horrible position. This story will be all over Brittany in a few days, for all Richard's officers know that you sent the letter."

"Well?"

"What steps are you going to take about it?"

"None," replied L'Oiseleur, leaning his head on his hand.

De Fresne stared at him, frowning. "I do not think that you are taking this business seriously enough."

And at that Aymar raised his head and laughed. "Yes, if not having had any sleep for two nights, if thinking about it every moment of the twenty-four hours, and having only this morning finally made up my mind not to blow my brains out is not taking it seriously, then I am not doing so!"

"I'm sorry," said his lieutenant briefly. "Do you intend then, just to go on and disregard—what will be said?"

"I thought I would try that," replied Aymar, leaning back

in his chair and suddenly looking very young and tired. "I would rather tell the men, but it could do no good, and I think I ought to pull the remnant together and keep the enemy's communications cut a little longer.—You see, after all, I am not entirely bought by the Imperialists!"

"I never said you were," retorted de Fresne gruffly. "But I think that you will find yourself obliged to take some definite step—May I say what I think you ought to do?"

The young man nodded.

"Give up your command for the time, go to Sol de Grisolles, and ask for a military enquiry, so that you can justify yourself."

"Give up my command—have myself put under arrest!" exclaimed L'Oiseleur. "No, certainly not!" He looked at the giver of this unwelcome advice a moment and added, "May I ask what you mean by 'ought'—and that it would be to my advantage, or that you conceive it to be my duty?"

"Both," answered de Fresne with brevity.

Aymar's eyes flashed dangerously. "Are you going to teach me——" he began, and then, with a great effort, stopped himself. "Tell me, have you communicated any of your knowledge to the men?"

"No, of course I have not. Except for some necessary converse with them—in which I learnt that you were here—and for trying to assuage a certain excitement that there was over my reappearance, I came straight to you.—You are aware, no doubt, that they are out of hand?"

"Very well aware! And yet you suggest that I should vacate my command!"

"It would not, I admit, be a happy moment to succeed you, La Rocheterie, even temporarily. But I will take the command—if you offer it me."

Aymar sprang to his feet. "Monsieur de Fresne! This is a little too strong! I gave you leave to advise me, not to dictate to me!"

"Don't quarrel with me, La Rocheterie! believe me, I don't want to!" And de Fresne's tone showed it. "Won't you do it?" he asked again after a pause. "It is the only profitable step that you can take."

And for an instant or two, as well as his wearied brain would let him, the young man did weigh the proposal. But he had just, with no small effort, screwed himself up to quite another course. This course would involve having the core of the business dragged out into the light of day, the unveiling

of Avoye's unconscious share in the disaster, the bandying about of her name, her relations to him. . . .

"I am sure that you are advising me to the best of your ability, de Fresne," he said more gently. "And I beg your pardon if I was rather short with you just now, for, Heaven knows, it would be a thankless task you would take up. But I cannot do what you ask."

Nicolas de Fresne sat for a moment without moving; then he got to his feet with a sigh. "Very well," he said. He looked down at his left side. "My sword is in the enemy's hands, so I am unable to ask you to accept it, save figuratively."

Aymar stepped backwards as if he had been struck.

"I cannot do anything else," said de Fresne, looking at the hut wall beyond him.

"You are resigning because I will not!"

"If you like to put it that way."

"Then you . . . you do think that ugly thing of me, de Fresne! Don't you know me—don't you know my family history? You, who have fought with me, and know what memories I carry, you think I *could* betray my dead!"

"I cannot reconcile it with my sense of honour," replied de Fresne, standing up very stiff—the stiffer, no doubt, that he was moved by the agony in the appeal, "that you refuse to take the obvious method of clearing your name. I do not say that I think you a traitor, for, as you say, I know you. . . . But, painful as it is, I must ask you to excuse me from serving under you any longer."

Save for the sweep of a pine-branch over the roof the silence was then absolute. In that silence Aymar put his left hand on his sword; and very slowly his head went down on his breast.

When he lifted it his mouth was set, his eyes very bright. "I hope my sense of honour is not less keen than yours, Monsieur de Fresne," he said quietly. "I must beg to refuse your sword. . . . I will ask you, instead, to accept mine." And, unfastening it, sheath and all, he laid it on the table with the hilt towards his second-in-command.

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". . . Does not that satisfy you?" asked Aymar after a moment. "I cannot do more."

De Fresne woke from what seemed a stupor. "You have done too much. Take it back—I never meant that! *I* have no right to demand your sword. Take it and put it into the General's hands."

His leader gave a little smile. "I had just as soon surrender it to you; and you have none yourself now.—But perhaps you would rather not wear mine."

De Fresne looked from the sheathed blade on the table to its owner, and abruptly held out his hand.

But Aymar shook his head. "No—not yet. Afterwards, if you like. . . . And now, how are you going to account to the men for my departure?"

"You will have to say something yourself, I think, L'Oiseleur.—My God, how I hate doing this!"

Aymar had sat down again. "Let me put you in possession of certain facts before I leave you," he said composedly. "First, about du Tremblay. Of course I—you—cannot support him now. I sent de Soulanges to him on Saturday morning with the news, but you must know nevertheless what his plans are. I believe I have not yet destroyed the cipher notes I made at our interview." He searched in a pocket. "No, here they are; and I can leave them with you as a memorandum. I put them into cipher because secrecy as to his real intention is all important. You see that on Friday next he proposes to move along the Aven in such a way as to deceive the Bonapartists into thinking that he means to cross. But he will not cross; his real objective is Chalais, which, having caused the enemy to concentrate, as he hopes, on the wrong side of the river, he calculates on carrying by a coup de main. Meanwhile—what's that?"

He sprang up, thrusting the paper back into his pocket, for there had come a sudden rush of feet and of excited voices outside, and—an unprecedented thing—the hut door was abruptly flung wide, revealing two or three of the Eperviers. For a second L'Oiseleur stood amazed; the next, he strode forward.

"What is the meaning of this? Who told you to come here?"

A confused babel from outside answered him. All his remaining men appeared to be there, and among them, of course, the towering form of Magloire Le Bihan. But he seemed to be trying to keep the crowd back.

"If you have a spokesman I will hear you," said Aymar, frowning. "Otherwise, leave my quarters at once!"

One of the foremost invaders, advancing a little over the threshold, thereupon threw out a hand towards de Fresne, and said meaningly, "Perhaps *he* can explain what happened at Pont-aux-Rochers!" And instantly other voices took him up. "He knows who the traitor was!" "L'Oiseleur, make him tell us!"

A swift glance passed between Aymar and his subordinate. It was *seen* and misunderstood. A roar went up. "Comrades, it was M. de Fresne himself! And L'Oiseleur knows it!"

More Chouans began to crowd in, threateningly; the narrow doorway was blocked. Very angry, Aymar advanced on the invaders.

"Leave my quarters at once, men!" he said imperiously. "No, M. de Fresne is no traitor—far from it! There has been no treachery in this business, only a mistake."

The Eperviers retreated a little from before him, but the hut was not cleared. "Mistake . . . mistake!" the word was flung about. "A mistake that needs atoning for!" "M. de Fresne's then!" "Let M. de Fresne explain why he led us into an ambush!" "Aye, and let him explain why he moved us out of the wood here while L'Oiseleur was away!"

"M. de Fresne has nothing to account for," cried his leader hotly. "And if he had, he accounts for it to me, and not to you!"

"L'Oiseleur knows that it is M. de Fresne," repeated the originator of this idea stubbornly. "That was why he came riding all that way to warn us. Let M. de Fresne come out and answer for himself!"

They were horribly tenacious when once they had got an idea into their heads; Aymar knew that well. And this most fallacious notion must be dispelled at all costs. A little behind him, his arms folded, de Fresne was now facing the intruders with a slightly ironical expression. The men pushed forward once more.

"Give us up M. de Fresne, Monsieur de la Rocheterie! Let him come out and explain to us!" And all at once a perfect howl went up. "What is that paper he is putting into his coat?"

For the elder man, suddenly remembering the incriminating letter lying on the table behind him, had turned his back, and was now thrusting it into his breast.

"Go out of this place!" exclaimed L'Oiseleur. He laid a hand on his pistol. "I will shoot the first man who stirs another step. Go outside, all of you!"

They surged back a little.

"May I speak to you, sir?" enquired Magloire from his place in the rear. Aymar could not but motion him to come forward. After all, he was an officer, and had certainly not been inciting the rest . . . at this moment anyhow.

The giant came, saluting. "I told you, Monsieur le Vicomte," he said in a low voice, "that they were crazy about this idea of treachery, and now, if there is going to be a mystery, there will be no holding them. Why is M. de Fresne hiding that paper? There'll be violence if you can't explain!"

Yes, de Fresne was hiding a paper—to save him! It was *his* doing that his lieutenant was in this utterly false position. What must he be thinking? Intolerably nettled, Aymar acted on the first impulse that came to him—a thing he was always too prone to do when the risk was his alone.

"You are right," he replied, "and there shall be no mystery. I will show you myself what is in that paper, and then you will know that M. de Fresne is perfectly innocent in the matter of Pont-aux-Rochers. Monsieur de Fresne, give me that letter! You shall have it back."

De Fresne turned round, appalled. "La Rocheterie, don't do it!" he whispered. "They will not touch me. Don't show it them, for God's sake!"

His words, for all that he had dropped his voice, were audible in the stillness which had now descended. And they produced, not unnaturally, a tenfold stronger impression of his own guilt than before. Something like an ugly rush would have taken place towards him but that the doorway was so narrow and that L'Oiseleur, springing between him and the assailants, drew a pistol and cocked it. The wave in consequence swayed back again.

"Give me the letter, de Fresne!" he repeated over his shoulder.

"No, no—it's too dangerous!"

"Dangerous! At least, then, it shall be dangerous to the right person! Give me the letter!"

And, the pistol in his right hand directed at his followers, Aymar held out his left.

"God forgive me!" said de Fresne. The letter changed hands. Aymar replaced the pistol and advanced to the door, and, seeing that he was really coming outside, the men huddled hastily into the sunshine. Aymar followed them.

"Which of you can read?" he asked, looking round. "You,

Goulven, and you, Hervé Le Bihan? Come here, then. You see this letter, which is from M. de Fresne himself—there is his name at the end—and that it is to tell me, as was his duty, of the move he was going to make over the bridge. You can read that, eh? Well, that is all—that is the paper which you foolishly think he was trying to hide.”

He kept the letter in his own hands, while, bending over it on either side, with grunts and efforts, the two men laboriously went through its contents, repeating the words aloud, unperturbed by the deciphered message. And Aymar looked over their heads at the rest and wondered what was going to happen next. To hold them in rein now needed a tight grip, and he was very tired, and more than heartsick. . . .

“Well, are you satisfied?” he asked patiently.

“Yes,” said Goulven slowly, “that is what M. de Fresne did—he took us to this place, the bridge of Pont-aux-Rochers. But why did he write it down so that the Blues knew it?”

“I tell you,” said the young man, not patiently this time, “that he wrote it to me, while I was away, so that I should know it.” And as they bent their heads once more, and tried to peer at the address on the other side, he added, “You can see for yourselves that it was sent to me at Sessignes,” and turned over the letter.

As he did so de Fresne, behind him, made, unseen, a gesture of desperation—and Aymar himself turned cold as he saw, on the top left-hand corner of the reverse, a bold endorsement in another hand than de Fresne’s . . . “Sent to me by the Vicomte de la Rocheterie, called ‘L’Oiseleur,’ on the night of April 27th, 1815.—A. RICHARD.” He shifted his hold of the paper like lightning, so that his left hand covered that corner instead of the lower; but even so the signature was visible. Perhaps the slow minds of his followers would not grasp its meaning. . . .

“There, Hervé,” he said carelessly, managing to master the swift impulse to snatch the whole thing quickly away, “you see this was really sent to me.” And he was on the point of folding up the letter when a hand fell on his left wrist. It was Magloire’s. He had been looking over the shoulder of his cousin Hervé.

“Wait a moment, L’Oiseleur,” he said coolly. “What is Colonel Richard’s name doing on the outside of this letter, then?”

Aymar’s blood leapt up at the presumption of the grasp and the tone. He looked at Magloire with such fire that the

giant, muttering, "I beg your pardon," recoiled. And Aymar, clutching at the first excuse that came into his head, said haughtily, as he folded up the letter. "M. de Fresne has been a prisoner; it is quite natural that Colonel Richard should have examined his papers."

As acting, his composed demeanour was excellent, but the excuse he had given was, as he instantly recognised, not so happy. It was admitting that de Fresne had had the letter in his possession again. And as a result the man Goulven, evidently bewildered, remarked, "But that letter could not have been among his papers, Monsieur le Vicomte. He sent it to you; you said so. You had not sent it to him!"

"No, not to *him!*" broke in Magloire significantly. And, thrusting aside the man between them, he faced his young leader. "There was something else written in the corner, L'Oiseleur. Your hand was over it. Let us see that!"

He had thrown aside the scabbard. It was war. But before Aymar could say anything, de Fresne, pushing forward, exclaimed quickly, "What Colonel Richard wrote on my papers only concerns me. Give me my letter back, please, La Rocheterie!"

Instantly the dull and tenacious suspicions of that crowd were rekindled. "No, no, M. de Fresne wants to hide it!" was shouted, and the words 'ambush,' 'treachery,' began once more to fly about.

But Magloire Le Bihan was unmoved by them, and simply repeated his request a little more threateningly. "Will you let us see what is written on that letter, Monsieur le Vicomte, or must we take it from you?"

"Take it from me!" exclaimed Aymar, at boiling pitch. "*Take it!*" Then he suddenly stopped.

There was a tense pause. Under the wide-brimmed hats with the pendant ribbons the eyes of all those eager, saturnine faces were fixed on him. Should he tear the letter up? No—they would seize the fragments, and the very action would be a confession of guilt. He stood on the edge of an unimagined precipice; better to leap in than be pushed.

"Very well," he said contemptuously, "you can see it . . . and make what you can of it!" He held out the letter to Magloire, half turned his back on him, and folded his arms. Almost instantly Magloire smote the letter and burst into a hoarse laugh.

"Listen, *les gars*, what is written on this letter—what L'Oiseleur was trying to hide!" And slowly, clearly, he read

out the endorsement, read it twice, "Sent to me by the Vicomte de la Rocheterie, called 'L'Oiseleur,' on the night of April 27th, 1815.—A. RICHARD."

But his hearers were so puzzled that they merely gaped in silence.

"You must be fools if you don't understand!" shouted Magloire, brandishing the letter. "It is not M. de Fresne at all—it is L'Oiseleur himself who has betrayed us—L'Oiseleur who sent this with his own hands to the Blues to tell them that we should be at Pont-aux-Rochers last Friday morning . . . and took care not to be there himself!"

Aymar leapt forward. "How *dare* you——" he began; but his words were drowned in uproar. "It's not true, Magloire—he came to warn us! L'Oiseleur, say it's not true!" That brief monosyllable was hurling about like a missile, as he braced himself to meet the crucial moment with the knowledge that his hold was slipping, slipping. . . . But there was no hesitation in the way he faced the questioners.

"It is quite true, men," he said steadily, "that I sent the letter to Colonel Richard, but the doing so was part of a plan for——"

He got no further, for the simple reason that he could not make himself heard above Magloire's triumphant bellowing. —There was nothing for it but to shoot him out of hand. He drew his pistol, cocked it, and shouting, "I will give you three seconds to stop that noise!" levelled it at the mutineer. Almost immediately his pistol arm was seized. Furious, and as surprised as furious, Aymar turned on his assailant to find that it was Hervé, Magloire's cousin. "Let go my arm instantly!" he cried. He almost succeeded in freeing it, but in the struggle he lost his pistol; at the moment it was dragged from his hold the hammer fell, and a man near clapped his hand to his arm with a scream. Next second Magloire himself had seized his leader's other arm and laid a powerful hand on his shoulder. "He will shoot us all if we are not careful!" he shouted.

For an instant longer Aymar threw every ounce of his strength into the endeavour to throw off the double grasp. But Magloire only laughed; even L'Oiseleur, no weakling, was but a child in his hold. Aymar ceased struggling. If it was useless, it was a mistake.

But Le Bihan was going too fast for the majority. Out of the clamour came cries, almost terrified cries, of "Don't

touch him! Let him go, Magloire—it will be the worse for you! He has the *jartier*!” “The *jartier*, Magloire! Let him go!”

And the rebel was obviously taken aback for a moment; he had forgotten to reckon with a superstition which he did not share. For one instant hope flared up in his captive’s brain—and died as quickly. Deliverance would never come on that score!

“*Has he got it?*” yelled Magloire, his eyes on the young man’s face. “*Has he got it?* The luck would never stay with a traitor!”

A quiver went through L’Oiseleur from head to foot.

“No, he must have it!” cried the bewildered voices. “He always wears it. Show it us, L’Oiseleur!”

Aymar, white to the lips, retorted, “I shall show you nothing of the sort till Magloire Le Bihan is shot for insubordination!”

“We need not wait for any conditions of that kind!” sneered Magloire. “I will show you, since L’Oiseleur is so reluctant.” And before Aymar guessed what he was about he had drawn his hunting-knife and inserted it under his left sleeve.

Less because of what that action must inevitably bring to light, than because it was so intolerable to him to be held as he was and subjected to search, Aymar did once more try violently for a second or two to withdraw his arm from the iron grip. It was scarcely therefore Le Bihan’s fault that the two-edged hunting-knife cut rather more than it was intended to do. An instant later Magloire’s powerful hands had made short work of the seams of coat and shirt alike; these were ripped asunder to the shoulder, and he was gazing delightedly at the bare arm he held captive.

He laughed. To him, as to L’Oiseleur himself, the amulet was a farce to overawe children, but the life of him who once wore it might be hanging, for all that, on the absence of that frail circlet of rushes. Aymar had never given the *jartier* a thought since it had broken in that blossom-laden place which had witnessed alike his brief moments of happiness and the beginning of this black hour, but now . . . Was that going to undo him in the end—the foolish, half-fraudulent charm he had thought he need wear no longer?

He was for a moment barely conscious that Magloire was holding his naked arm upwards at full stretch so that all could see the talisman was gone. Moreover, down that arm was now running a thread of crimson—blood like any other

man's. L'Oiseleur, of the charmed life, was no longer invulnerable . . . and naturally, since he no longer wore the charm.

The effect of the double revelation on those superstitious minds was paralysing. The Eperviers began to huddle away in silence from the leader who had been so lucky because he wore the amulet—and who, by the same reasoning, was a definite source of ill-luck because he wore it no longer. The *jartier* had left him; therefore anything was possible. And it was May Day . . . when such magic was abroad. . . . Magloire read all this in the fierce, frightened faces; he nodded across to Hervé, made a sign, and his own immediate partisans closed round, so that the giant was able to let another man take his place, and be free to direct the course of what he had at last accomplished.

Aymar suffered the change of guardianship without protest. What was the use of fighting the situation any longer? If his men, his own men, could turn against him like this. . . . Yet Eveno would have been dead at his feet before a finger could have been laid on his leader . . . but he himself had sent Eveno to death. . . . Out of the bad dream that it had all become now he heard only de Fresne's voice, hot and incisive:

"M. de la Rocheterie is my prisoner, men! He has already given up his sword to me, and he will answer for any mistake that he has made to——"

"No!" broke in Magloire still more incisively, "he is ours! And he will answer to *us*, Monsieur de Fresne! Take him down to the clearing, *gars*; we can go into this matter better there."

(9)

They took Aymar down the little slope from the wood-cutter's hut. He went unresisting; he was in the snare, the snare of his own devising—he, the Fowler . . . and now he began to be sure that there was only one way out of it, and this wood was to see that way taken.

The clearing was some hundred yards long and thirty wide; the beech trees in all their new glory stood round it, dazzlingly green against the more reluctant oaks. There were windflowers scattered under them like snowflakes, in one place, half seen, a pond of bluebells, and at the farther end a May tree, robed as a bride.

Magloire had preceded the little procession, and was now

standing near a large solitary beech at the nearer end of the glade. When they came up he pointed to it in silence.

The Vicomte de la Rocheterie, descendant of Crusaders, flushed deeply. "I give you my word of honour not to stir from this spot," he said in a low voice.

The Chouan shook his head. "You might be tempted," he replied curtly. "And if, later on . . . Hi, Eloi, fetch a rope!"

And Aymar set his teeth hard as his guards, after a second or two's hesitation, pressed him back against the smooth grey trunk, rock-like in its solidity. Even before the rope was brought someone produced a piece of rough cord, not very thick, and extending his arms behind him part of the way round the great tree, they fastened the cord to either wrist. By that device alone he was effectually a prisoner. The biting shame of it surged over him in a tide of wrath and defiance.

"Guilen—Coatsaliou—Le Merzer—Gloannec!" he called out suddenly, "are you going to stand by and see this done?"

A huge hand came across his mouth, forcing his head back against the tree-trunk. "We are all going to see justice done, Monsieur le Vicomte," said Magloire, the hand's owner. "If it has to be done on you, so much the worse for you! But done it will be." And as he removed his hand from the disgusted lips the rope, which had meanwhile arrived, was passed across L'Oiseleur's shoulders and tightened. And when it was knotted firmly across his shoulders, across the middle of his body, and just above his knees he could not stir a quarter of an inch.

"That will do," said Magloire. "Now Monsieur de la Rocheterie can answer our questions."

Aymar's lip curled. "Do you imagine for a moment that I shall do so, after this?" he demanded.

"You would be wise," said Hervé Le Bihan sombrely. "We have a right to ask." He came closer. "Monsieur de la Rocheterie, why did you send M. de Fresne's letter to Colonel Richard?"

Aymar took no notice of Hervé, but, turning his head, the only part of his body which remained now at his own disposal, he looked steadily at the arch-rebel who had broken his dominion, subjected him to an undreamt-of humiliation, and was no doubt contemplating the last supreme outrage, and said, as coldly as if he were judge, not victim, "My reason

was given to M. de Fresne; when it was offered to you you refused to hear it. It is a farce to ask me for it now, and you know it!"

At that, as though it were an appeal to him, de Fresne sprang up from the log at some distance on which he had been sitting, his head in his hands, during the carrying out of the indignity which he was powerless to prevent. "L'Oiseleur is right!" he cried, coming into the centre of the clearing. "He has given me his reason; he is ready to give it to a court of enquiry, the only tribunal which has the right to demand it."

Magloire shook his head. "We want no courts of enquiry. We are judges here! Let us have the reason!"

De Fresne looked appealingly at the beech tree.

"You can tell them if you like," said its captive indifferently.

And de Fresne had to bring out, as the only hope of saving his leader, the justification of the latter's conduct which had been so far from satisfying him a short time ago. He did his best with it.

When he had finished there was silence for a moment. Aymar, in a curiously detached way, was trying to consider what he should say if he heard that explanation for the first time. He was also becoming aware of the extreme discomfort, not to say pain, caused by the position of his strained arm and shoulder. The discomfort was not likely to grow less. . . .

"Now, Monsieur de Fresne," said Magloire, "tell us honestly, as you are a gentleman, what you thought of that explanation of M. de la Rocheterie's?"

De Fresne had not expected this, evidently. After a second or two's unhappy pause he said, looking on the ground, "Everybody is liable to make mistakes of judgment. I——"

"Give us a direct answer, please!" interposed Magloire.

"Tell the truth, de Fresne!" said Aymar suddenly. "It is always best."

The elder man glanced at the sardonic and defiant face, with the lock of rust-coloured hair, disordered in the struggle, fallen across the brow, and looked away. "I . . . I did not think it altogether satisfactory," he said unwillingly, "and so I advised M. de la Rocheterie to give up his sword—which you see he has done—and to submit himself to a court of war."

A growl broke out. "They do not like that term, my friend," observed Aymar. "They prefer private murder."

"It was not murder then, when you sent five hundred men to the death you had prepared for them?" asked the president of this tribunal, and Aymar did not answer him. For the last time, possibly, the vain and scorching tide of regret rose up about him, to the very throat. . . . But he was paying now—he could hardly pay more bitterly if they did proceed to murder him. . . . Murder him? No, surely, surely it could not be that he, Aymar de la Rocheterie, L'Oiseleur, was going to end like this, here and now . . . it was unthinkable. . . .

He came back to hear de Fresne saying, "What I believe is that M. de la Rocheterie had some other reason for his action which he did not see fit to reveal to me. And it must have been a good reason, worthy of L'Oiseleur, of the leader who held the Moulin Brûlé." Then his agitation got the better of him, "Oh, for God's sake untie him! You can't realise what you are doing—you, his own men!"

"Our leader, L'Oiseleur, exists no longer," said Magloire Le Bihan. "If M. de la Rocheterie has any further explanation, as you suggest, he had better give it to us at once."

"May I speak to him?" asked de Fresne suddenly.

"If you promise not to touch the ropes," answered Magloire.

"I promise," said de Fresne.

He came up to the tree, whiter than Aymar himself. "La Rocheterie, aren't you going to try to save yourself? The bargain—what was it? You must reveal it now!"

Aymar looked at him gravely. "Mon ami, I cannot."

De Fresne smote his empty hands together. "Tell them something! I cannot do anything more. It rests with you alone now."

L'Oiseleur shook his head. "What I should tell them would do me no good in their eyes—though it was not dishonourable. And even if it would save me, I would not tell them—now. . . . No, leave me to my fate, de Fresne . . . but try to get them to be quick about it!"

"You should never have shown them the letter!" said his lieutenant, tears in his eyes. "I would rather have let them think that I was to blame. If only I had not come back . . . if only I had not brought the letter! Oh, my God, to see you there like that . . . it is too dreadful!"

"No, you are not to blame," replied Aymar steadily, though de Fresne's words made the ropes seem tighter. "You acted as an honest man in coming back to me with

the letter . . . I can't shake hands with you now . . . I would like you to keep my sword if you will?"

De Fresne looked hard at him, nodded, dashed the back of his hand over his eyes, and, turning away without another word, carried his agitation and, evidently, his arguments, into the midst of the discussion which was going forward, with obvious differences of opinion and with frequent glances towards the beech tree.

Aymar suddenly felt that he had been there a long time. The sun was hot; his head was aching, and he would have given anything, almost, in the world—though everything was ceasing to have value for him now—if he could have had his arms unbound.

And now Hervé and one or two others were coming to him again, Magloire remaining at a distance. "Monsieur le Vicomte," said the former, "you have heard what M. de Fresne has said. He has acknowledged that he did not find your explanation of your conduct satisfactory"—de Fresne suddenly looked round, anguish on his face—"he says that you gave up your sword and were going before a court of war. But we—what is left of us after the trap you arranged for us at Pont-aux-Rochers—consider that we have a better right to try you than a lot of gentry of whom we have never heard. Do you still refuse to say anything in your own defence?"

"I do, most emphatically," returned Aymar. "I acknowledge no right of the kind. You have defied my authority, you have outraged my person, and even if you intend to kill me in cold blood I shall not plead to you. You need not therefore waste time!"

So they went away—rather hesitatingly, it was true—and seemed to enter into fresh discussions from which de Fresne's voice emerged from time to time; he appeared to be threatening them. Aymar had an impression that they were drawing lots, but on the whole he felt curiously little interest in their deliberations. He found the delicate little windflowers at his feet more interesting; what a pity that they had been so trampled! More and more the peculiar effect of strain and lack of sleep was beginning to make itself felt—that sensation of having a hollow in one's brain, of being maimed of one's faculties. But it did not matter now . . . though it *had* mattered up there by the hut, before his control of the mutineers had slipped from him. Yes, he had made a mess of that; he ought to have shot Magloire at once. . . .

"But I did not seem able to make up my mind," he murmured, as if he were speaking to someone near. "And besides, everything was my fault." The windflowers looked up at him then with their shy compassion.

He lifted his head and gazed down the clearing at the shifting groups in their gay embroidered jackets, blue and yellow and white. They seemed a little blurred; did this strange feeling which was growing on him betoken faintness? Whatever they did to him it would be intolerable to faint first; they would think he was afraid. . . . Could he bring himself, rather than risk that, to ask to have his arms—only his arms untied? Not yet. . . . Oh, how slow they were!

Suddenly, out of nowhere, came a vision of Avoye, waiting for an answer to her letter . . . the answer that, now, she would never receive . . . that he would never write—walking perhaps on the terrace under his window, with the dog Sarrasin beside her, thinking of those long years of patience, and how they had ended at last. . . . *How they had ended!* And they were ending like this!

For a second or two the young man was hard put to it to keep his composure. He threw his head back against the great pillar behind him, the heart in him beating with fury and longing and shame. Still, under his tight-shut lids, he could see her—grave, but with a little smile round her beautiful mouth—while he, who, holding her tenderly, should, only four nights ago, have bent to kiss it, had his arms stretched out behind him and was fastened himself immovably to a tree, in the sight of all his men. . . . Another wave of faintness crept towards him. . . .

—And then the dullness in his ears was suddenly rent. Two men, shouting and gesticulating, were running through the undergrowth towards the central group, and, as he heard what they were crying out, Aymar understood in a moment what had happened. They were his outposts, and the Bonapartists were advancing on the Bois des Fauvettes.

The news fell like a bombshell into the unprepared Chouans. A few ran bewildered among the trees, seeking cover; the majority were snatching up their muskets, but with panic in every movement. De Fresne and Magloire, however, had not lost their heads; the former was obviously trying to marshal the men into some kind of order to get them away. The tension held Aymar more painfully than his bonds. For there was . . . surely there was . . . a chance that he might be forgotten in the confusion! De Fresne had never

once looked in his direction; with a drawn sword in his hand—which must be *his*—he was shepherding the men hastily out of the clearing, pointing the way, shouting encouragements; and Magloire, still farther away, was doing the same. And the men were obeying—they *were* filing out. It was not going to end like this after all!

Was it true indeed, or a dream, that de Fresne had actually turned back, and was running stealthily up the side of the clearing under the trees, the bare blade in his hand? He could soon free him with that! O God, if only nobody turned and saw!

Vain hope! De Fresne was only a few yards off when Magloire came running into the clearing again. "No, no—that will not do!" he shouted, dropped to one knee in the middle and took a quick, steady aim at the beech-tree's target.

There was a flash, a report, and a violent blow as if someone had struck him in the left shoulder. Aymar gasped a moment with the shock; then he saw de Fresne standing with the sword half lifted.

"Oh, for God's sake put it through me and finish this!" he called out to him with entreaty in his voice, and set his teeth. But the elder man, with an oath, sprang for the side of the tree. Before he got there Magloire, still kneeling, fired his second barrel, but this time the bullet missed by an inch, whizzing by Aymar's ear into the trunk beside him. "Go back—you'll be hit!" shouted L'Oiseleur; but de Fresne had already been seized by two Eperviers who had hurled themselves on him, and Aymar saw that, farther down the clearing, another man had his musket at the level.

If only it might be through the heart this time, and this purgatory be ended! But with the report came a hot and searing sensation in the right side, and the young man, biting his lips, writhed mutely for a second. The next, the whole scene began to swim away from him; yet he heard, or thought he heard, a sort of long breath of horror or satisfied vengeance run about the place, and a voice that might have been Magloire's cry something about Pont-aux-Rochers. . . . His head fell forward on his breast.

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So he never saw how de Fresne, cursing wildly, freed himself from his assailants, and turned to the urgent business of leadership, since the tragedy was now played out. But the two men who had seized him, as they left the wood, turned

and fired at the motionless figure against the tree. One shot sped over the bowed head into the trunk of the beech, the other ploughed straight across L'Oiseleur's breast, cutting the ribbon of his cross of Saint Louis as neatly as though it had been done on purpose, and sending the cross itself spinning to his feet. But he never moved.

And after a little the clearing, recently so clamorous with emotion, was quiet again, and a bird hopping cautiously out on a twig of the beech tree, looked down with one round, bright eye on the strange fruitage it bore. Probably it had never before seen a man stand so still.

(10)

The bird had flown away when Aymar came out of that vague place of forgetfulness to realities. As he lifted his head he wondered dizzily why he could not move; then why someone was pressing a knife across his breast. . . . The rest was coming back; *that* he could not remember. He looked down, and saw that a furrow had been cut clean across his uniform, just below the rope—and not of his uniform only. And his cross of Saint Louis lay among the trampled wind-flowers. It all came back . . . too clearly . . .

They had left him here, to die, alone, in pain, in ignominy, in the uttermost shame that could befall a soldier—his own men. And here, lashed immovably to this hateful tree, sick with the constraint of his position as much as with the pain of his wounds, and bleeding fast from all of them, but unable to lift a finger to staunch them—here, on his feet, looking down the clearing at that drift of hawthorn blossom, he would remain till he died.

—No! not while there was his scarcely broken strength still in him! The determination to be free suddenly possessed him like fire, and now that only the tall trees watched him he began to struggle like a trapped animal. But, even with the most furious efforts, he could hardly move his body at all, for, as he soon found, he was too tightly pinned above the knees. And, even had the ropes not held him so relentlessly he could not, try as he would, get his arms free of the separate cord which held them back, almost agonisingly by this time, against the great trunk behind him. Each of his efforts only tightened its grip on his lacerated wrists—for they were raw and bleeding before he desisted from tugging. And all the

while a cuckoo mocked him with its monotonous and mechanical cry, which held no hint now of the meanings of spring, but only a horrible mirth. "You are fast, you are fast, you can't get away!" . . . Yes, this was going to be the end, *his* end, after all!

Nor was it, plainly, very far off. The only effect of Aymar's struggles had been greatly to increase the hæmorrhage; the warm stream coursing down his body from his side had not only soaked by this time through his uniform, but was appearing as a spreading stain on his white buckskin breeches. He looked down at it—and at the other stains too. It was hard to believe that he, young and strong as he was—or had been, half an hour ago—was about to die merely from that, the ebb which any charitable hand could have arrested, which his own might possibly have staunched if they had not been so simply but effectually fettered. . . . Yet that was what was going to happen—unless someone came in time.

But who could come, except the Bonapartists? And to be found by them would be intolerable, for his situation admitted of one explanation only.—All the countryside knew of his defeat. It would be almost better to die than that . . . even by this death, lonely and dishonoured as it was, the death without alleviation of any kind, which for Avoys's sake he had brought upon himself—and in vain.

For the first time a groan broke from him—only to be swallowed up in the chorus of birdsong with which the green, deserted wood was now ringing. He made a last effort to wrench himself free. Useless . . . useless! But—if only he might have seen Avoys to explain before he died. What would she hear . . . afterwards? She would have all the rest of her life for the evidences of his guilt to penetrate the unbelief with which he knew quite well she would meet them at first. Gradually, as the truth leaked out, she would be forced to believe him guilty in that sense in which he never had been guilty, since he had suffered a disgraceful penalty for an act of rashness to which that merciful term would never be applied now. . . . Oh, if only he had carried out his intention of this morning, and made an end of himself before the wild hyacinths became a blur of pain to the sight, and the trees in their spring bravery merely so many stakes to be tied to! He could have lain dead with less disgrace, hidden by the bluebells till they died.

Aymar was growing much weaker; he knew it. The sun-

light no longer seemed warm, and his head was beginning to swim. Only one conscious desire was left soon—to be loosed, to be able to lie down on the beech leaves at his feet, for the pain in his mangled wrists seemed worse than any of his wounds, and his position was, nakedly, torture. And he was so desperately thirsty. . . . But oblivion was advancing with faster strides now, for the anemones, the laughing May tree, the bright beeches at which he was staring were beginning to vanish and reappear again, and every breath was becoming more difficult to draw. . . .

Then pain went, and he began to have the oddest fancies. He was part of the beech tree from which he could not stir—he *was* the beech tree. He had never been anything else. Once there had been a young man named Aymar de la Rocheterie, who had run and ridden and fought and moved about freely; but *he* had stood here always, year in, year out, bare in the frosts of winter, clothed with green as now in spring—a splendid and vigorous tree. . . . But if that were so, how was it that Aymar de la Rocheterie was gasping so for breath—as he could hear—and that his head swam so violently . . . and that from the blue sky which showed through the brilliant leaves above him strange whirling specks like black snow were falling? How odd that was in spring . . . but was it spring when it felt so bitter cold?

As his failing senses suggested the question the spreading bough above him seemed suddenly to swoop down on him . . . then the great tree which would not let him go began itself to sink with him into a cold, suffocating darkness. . . . Aymar gave a couple of deep gasps, and his head fell forward for the second time—not to be lifted again. He had looked his last on the Bois des Fauvettes.

It was thus that the Bonapartists found him some three-quarters of an hour later—save that, with the oncoming of such profound unconsciousness, the deadly hæmorrhage had ceased. Only curiosity, no thought that, from his appearance, there was a glimmer of life left in him, led them to cut him down. But of their surprise, their gratification when, on searching him, they found from his papers who he was, their discovery of the cipher notes, their rough attempts at surgery and his subsequent odyssey in the cart, Aymar knew nothing whatever. Fate showed him some scrap of mercy after all.

CHAPTER VII

THE ROAD BACK

"Il est tard, nous voici dans la forêt; vois-tu comme elle est noire. Nous aurons de la peine à nous en tirer."—*Le Mercure Galant*.

(1)

. . . WAS that the cuckoo? No, it must be a gull . . . and that other sound was the breaking waves. The voice had ceased.

So Laurent left the Bois des Fauvettes and woke, through the sense of hearing, to his actual surroundings. He shivered, and withdrew his hands from his face. Aymar, paler than he had yet seen him since he left his bed, his eyes sunk in their sockets, was staring past him at the wall of the cave. There could be no doubt that he also had been, in spirit, in that ill-omened wood—with this difference, that two months before he had likewise been there in the body. What could one say—what could one say?

And it was Aymar who broke the silence now. "The rest you know," he said. His voice was extremely quiet, but between his knees his hands were so tightly clasped together that it looked as if they must break each other.

The rest! Why, the first thing of which he was really fully conscious, after that dreadful finish in the wood, must have been Guitton's nightmare visit. . . . "Yes. The rest I——" Laurent got out huskily, and, for the life of him, could say no more. So, after a second or two's silence, he got up with a gesture of absolute desperation and went out of the cave.

His head was spinning with relief and horror and shame. Oh, how *could* he have doubted him for an instant! Of course there was an explanation! But what a story—what a tangle! There was no real culprit after all. L'Oiseleur's men had been betrayed by Fate; but Fate had used his

hand in so cruel a manner that he would never be able to deny the fact, though the intention had been as remote as the farthest star. And, across the midst of a relief so intense that Laurent's body almost shook with it, cut the dismayed realisation of how difficult it was going to be for Ayamar to avoid the stigma, if anyone chose to fasten it on him.

But what, for all his passion of sympathy, he never realised, was that while he stood in the open regaining his composure—not more than three or four minutes—Ayamar himself was waiting for his verdict. In Laurent's mind was rather the consciousness of his own need of pardon, and, when the air had steadied him, he went in again with some idea of seeking that forgiveness immediately.

But Ayamar was no longer sitting on the rough bed. He lay face downwards across the sailcloth and the seaweed, one arm crooked above his head, the other, the injured one, flung out straight and stiffly. The hands of both were tightly clenched. And his attitude held such an utter despair that it took Laurent by the throat; this was what even the telling of that story had cost him!

"Ayamar," he began. There was no sign of movement in the prostrate figure, except that the hands clenched themselves a little tighter still. But a barely recognisable voice came from it. "If you are come to take farewell of me . . . you are excused. Go quickly!"

And at that Laurent saw what he had done. He threw himself on his knees and bent over him, seizing the rigid, out-flung hand in a grip as tense as its own.

"Ayamar! Ayamar! forgive me! How *could* you think such a thing! I went out—imbecile that I was—because I was afraid of making a fool of myself . . . because I could not say what I felt. . . . Ayamar, for God's sake! What have you to reproach yourself with—except the most damnable ill-luck? . . . Oh, mon ami, look at me, and you will see that I am speaking the naked truth!"

But Ayamar did not look at him. His shoulders moved suddenly, he brought his bent left arm under his forehead as he lay there, and in a moment more Laurent de Courtomer had the dubious satisfaction of accomplishing what neither physical pain nor prolonged mental torture, neither the catastrophe of the Bois des Fauvettes nor the contempt and insults of the Château d'Arbelles had been able to bring about. L'Oiseleur had had just one turn of the screw too much, and

that from the hand which would least have desired to hurt him. With its relaxation he broke down completely.

(2)

Occasional glimpses taken over his shoulder, as Michel Royer pulled into shore near the 'Panier' that afternoon, conveyed to him the impression of two forms lying on the beach between the cave and the edge of the water; and when he had clambered out of his boat and pulled it up, he found that his impression was perfectly correct. One of the young men he had guided overnight—the fair-haired one who wore uniform—was half sitting, half lying, against a small rock; the other was lying at full length on the sand with his head propped against him. They seemed so engrossed in conversation that they did not hear his approach.

He cleared his throat as he got nearer, and on that the young man sitting against the rock did turn his head. The other made no movement.

"Here is our host—if that is the correct term," he heard the former say. "Good afternoon, Monsieur Royer. To what do we owe this pleasure?"

"I remembered that there was no wine," said the fisherman, holding up a piece of old fishing-net. "I have brought ye a bottle; and a rare good ham, and another loaf or two. And I weren't easy in my mind about your friend there—him that's hurt."

He that was hurt said quietly, "I am perfectly well this afternoon, thank you, Monsieur Royer." And Michel saw the other look down at him with a smile.

"I've come also, gentlemen," went on the old man, setting down his net, and mysteriously dropping his voice, "because I've something to tell ye which, if it's true—and mind ye, it mayn't be—will likely do ye both a power of good. They are saying in Sarzeau, so we hear this morning, that the Emperor's had a great defeat at some place I don't mind the name of, and his army's all to bits, and retreating."

"But the last we heard was of a victory won by him on the sixteenth!" cried the young officer. His friend had suddenly raised himself from his recumbent position. But for all their questions Mercury could tell them no more, and presently departed, as he came, by sea, himself only half believing that his information was correct, and not knowing that what he had just carried was the news of Waterloo.

"This may be true, or it may not," opined Laurent at length; "at any rate I am going to have a swim on the strength of it. Take care of my clothes for me!"

He stripped them off hastily, ran down the beach, and plunged in. Ayamar looked after him with a smile. When the swimmer came back, laughing and dripping, L'Oiseleur said thoughtfully, "There must be something in this news. If it is true, perhaps we need not stay here long."

"Yes," agreed Laurent, rubbing his face with his handkerchief, "but we can't move till we know something more definite. Meanwhile"—he hurried into his clothes—"let us go and eat. I am hungry. We will even drink to the news in the stuff Royer has brought."

Ayamar's arm was over his shoulder as they went towards the cave. At the entrance he suddenly removed it, and said in a rather unsteady voice, "... I find it so hard to believe. . . . Oh, mon ami, are you merely trying to comfort me when you say you hold me justified, when you say you would have done the same in my place? Is it true, Laurent, or is it only your good heart?"

And, his face as pale as ivory against the darkness within, he looked at him with eyes that pierced and supplicated at the same time. Laurent threw down the net of provisions and seized his available hand in both his own.

"Ayamar, on my honour as a gentleman! Have I not said so enough? You have brooded over this thing till you are morbid about it. I don't wonder. But, given what went before, the almost completed plan on the one hand, and a woman's life at stake on the other, I should have done the same. So would any man. If you will not believe me, what am I to do? Call you out for it?"

Ayamar freed his hand and put it on his shoulder. "Did I not say that no man ever had a friend like you?"

"But it isn't friendship, it's common sense!" retorted Laurent stoutly. "... Oh, saints and angels, I have broken the bottle of wine!"

(3)

There was a moon that night. She had the air of sailing fast out to sea like an enchanted ship, for light clouds were blowing inland at a great rate, giving her all the effect of nimble motion. And after her, in a lake of blue, swam Jupiter, following like a pinnace.

"What a night!" exclaimed Laurent, standing at the mouth of the cave. "Aymar, go to bed!"

"Why should I?" demanded his friend, who was sitting there also. "Why should I too not enjoy this spectacle. And I was thinking."

Laurent removed his gaze from the heavens.

"Thinking, for one thing," went on Aymar reflectively, "what a fool I was not to have told you all this earlier. It is always a mistake to be a coward, Laurent. But I could not bring myself to it. I could not tell the story in a word or two without producing a false impression either one way or the other, and . . . well, you see that in giving the necessary details I have told you things about myself that I never thought to tell anyone in the world. . . . Yet I hated taking all you did for me at Arbelles, and accepting your championship, when you did not know the truth. Day after day I said to myself that *to-morrow*—and then Guitton put an end to to-morrows."

"Not to speak of the fact," commented Laurent, "that at Arbelles you were never within a mile of being fit to embark on that story. Nor at La Baussaine either, if it comes to that."

"On the contrary, I nearly told you when we were sitting under the pear tree. But *this* was too recent," he looked down at his bandaged arm, "and you had taken it so ridiculously to heart. It would have given me an unfair advantage."

"Oh, Aymar, you really are——" '*sans tache*, like your motto,' was on Laurent's lips, but he did not say it aloud.

"No," said L'Oiseleur, looking up with a smile, "in this case I was not really a fool, as I suppose you were going to call me. You were too *émotionné* that afternoon to be capable of judging anything dispassionately. You admitted as much this morning."

"Perhaps so," replied Laurent, who had in fact made a clean breast of everything. "But I was certainly not going to call you a fool just now. I should never dare! Have you any idea, L'Oiseleur, how unapproachable you can make yourself when you wish?"

"How intolerable, I suppose you mean? But I am not being that now, am I? Those first days at Arbelles, however——" He broke off, and looked up at him keenly. "Now, confess, Laurent, that I did not make your task easy for you!"

"It was, perhaps, a little like nursing a porcupine," acknowledged the nurse, smiling. "You *would* not let me show what I felt. But now that I know what you had just been through, I wonder you did not go out of your mind."

Aymar looked away. "I think I was pretty near it once or twice," he said after a moment, "or I could not have felt, as I did, that everyone in the world was against me—even you. Sometimes I used to dream that it was all a dream—a nightmare. Then I would wake up . . . still in the nightmare. So—I suppose I wanted to hurt someone too!" He turned his eyes on Laurent again. "Yet you stayed, and put up with it—and with all my subsequent tiresomeness too! For though I know you have forgiven me for those early days, what about yesterday evening?"

"Yesterday evening?" exclaimed Laurent. "What had happened in that remote epoch, yesterday evening?"

"Yes, yesterday evening, when I sat in a ditch and refused to stir, and you had to use . . . drastic measures! If I can be unapproachable, as you call it, you can certainly be severe, mon ami!"

"Oh, do let's forget about yesterday evening!" cried Laurent, flushing in the moonlight.

"Agreed!" said Aymar, laughing. "As a matter of fact, I don't remember much about the latter part of it. Between trying to come to a decision about the future which I had not expected to have to take for days yet, and the jolting of that infernal cart, I really had such a headache that I could hardly see. You observe that I am not too proud to make excuses—to *you*."

Laurent suddenly sat down by him. "And what excuses am I to make," he said, averting his face, "for my horrible blindness of this morning? When I saw what I had done, I could have beaten my head against the cave wall."

Aymar put his hand over his. "Never mind. It is the only time you have ever failed—and I dare say I should have made it clearer to you that I was absolutely on the rack till I knew what you thought . . . I don't mind telling you now—only do not let us talk of it again—that in those few minutes, or hours, or whatever they were, when I thought you had thrown me over, I saw a third and much simpler alternative to those of leaving France or staying to face the future. If you had deserted me I should have done what you did this afternoon, Laurent—I should have gone for a swim. . . . But I should not have come back again."

Laurent, hearing the sincerity of that intention in the quiet voice, turned rather pale. Had so much, then, hung on *his* verdict? He was very far indeed from elation; he had never felt more humble in his life.

"But that would have seemed like a confession of guilt," he murmured, hardly knowing what he said.

"Yes, I know. But I *am* guilty—in fact, if not in intention."

"My dear Aymar, don't let us go over all that again now! I am sleepy, if you are not." He got up and held out his hand. "Do you think I had better look at your arm again before we turn in?"

Aymar got up too, shaking his head. "It is quite comfortable."

"You are such a confounded liar about yourself," retorted Laurent, confronting him, "that I never know when to believe you! That worst burn, when I looked at it this morning . . . I wish M. Perrelet——" He stopped, seeing the swift pain on Aymar's face, and then plunged boldly into the subject. "Aymar, what is to be done about Père Perrelet?"

Aymar pushed at the sand with his foot. "Nothing can be done. For him I am condemned out of my own mouth." He sighed suddenly. "Let us go to bed."

As they were both dropping off to sleep Laurent said, "Aymar, I have an idea. Will you give me leave to write to M. Perrelet?"

"To write what?"

"To tell him that whatever he heard that night was not the whole truth. That I know it all now, and can assure him that it is not a dishonourable story, as he must have thought."

"And as he made you think," finished L'Oiseleur dryly. Then, after a little silence, he added, "My dear fellow, he would only conclude, either that I had been telling you lies, or that you were very impressionable."

"Aymar, he may be impulsive, but you know that he was extraordinarily fond of you," said Laurent with reproach in his voice. "I think that was why he was so upset."

"Well, write me a certificate then," replied Aymar. Then he dropped his caustic tone, and said quite simply, "You can do whatever you think best, my dear Laurent. I owe him so much that if it would be any compensation to him to have a better opinion of me again I should be glad." And he added,

with a deep sigh, as if to himself, "There is a letter that I ought to have written many days ago."

Laurent woke about an hour later, when the moon was shining straight into their refuge. He thought of last night, and gave a long sigh of relief and contentment; and the next moment, though he had believed Aymar asleep, a hand stole into his, and he gripped it in return. There was no need of words, and none were spoken; but when Laurent went to sleep again his friend's hand was still in his.

(4)

As even the most epoch-making news is not conveyed to the brain of man by a special sense, but through the medium of other men and their devices, the couple in the 'Panier' remained for the next two days ignorant not only of Wellington's and Blücher's victory, but of Napoleon's brief visit to Paris, his abdication, the march of the English and Prussians towards the capital, and all the doings which were stirring their countrymen. For Royer had not visited them again.

In the meantime, however, they had plenty to occupy them—plenty of points to debate. Aymar had quite made up his mind to remain in France, and face whatever the future had to bring. For one thing, he felt that he must set himself to repair, as best he could, the calamity which he had brought on his men, by providing for the welfare of the maimed and assisting the families of the killed. Laurent, whom the very mention of the Eperviers roused to fury, soon realised, however, with relief, that his purpose applied only to those actually captured or killed at Pont-aux-Rochers or their kindred. Yet to supply their probable needs alone he began rather alarmedly to foresee Aymar's all but ruining himself—for he was not a rich man.

As for ruin in the other sense, Laurent contended that it was impossible to imagine that their own side could believe the story about him, L'Oiseleur, though the Bonapartists had naturally been only too glad to have a handle against a foe. To any Royalist who asked for an explanation Aymar could say, with perfect truth, that the scheme was a ruse which had miscarried; Laurent only wondered that he had never made this retort to his accusers at Arbelles. But Aymar had replied that on 'that horrible Friday,' he had not the breath, and that when Guitton sent for him he was

not in the mood for justifying himself. ('No,' thought Laurent, 'you are rather too much inclined never to be in that mood, my friend!')

The fact that the explanation had not satisfied his own lieutenant was palpably because de Fresne knew that there was a bargain involved; so long as the bargain idea did not get about, Laurent contended that the explanation proposed ought to prove perfectly satisfactory. But, as Aymar pointed out, there was no guarantee whatever that it would not get about, that it had not already done so, in fact—and worse, that the real nature of the bargain might not come out. That, objected Laurent stoutly, did not make it, in his opinion, worse; it was not a disreputable compact; it was to save a woman. And on that he elicited from L'Oiseleur his deep desire to keep from Mme de Villecresne the knowledge that she had been, most unwittingly, the cause of the whole miserable business. That desire the young man could understand, but when his friend asserted that she would further dislike the ethics of the whole affair, and be horror-struck that he could take so great a risk for any woman's life—even though it were hers—M. de Courtomer privately disbelieved him.

But at any rate there could be no doubt that Aymar was willing to sacrifice almost anything to keep the secret from coming to his cousin's ears; what agitated him was the thought that she might already have learnt it. To comfort him, Laurent pointed out that even 'that devil' at Arbelles had no idea of what the bargain was, and that he, Laurent, had been told in early days that Richard's own officers had not known it, which looked as if Richard had kept his mouth shut. But Aymar's fervent wish that he could ensure Richard's keeping his mouth shut in perpetuity he dismissed as a thing scarcely in the realm of the practicable. And there was always the danger of the Marquis de Vaubernier's letting out something. Although he had solemnly sworn secrecy he was, as Aymar acknowledged, really more dangerous than Richard, who had not. Over the possibility of Vaubernier's indiscretion he worked himself up into such a fever that Laurent agreed to their starting for Sessignes at the first possible moment. And they waited with growing impatience for news from Port-Marie which might enable them to leave the cave in safety, for if the tidings of the Emperor's defeat had been confirmed, it might possibly have rid the district of the Imperialists.

If this were so, it would make Laurent's contemplated journey to Sessignes less risky (especially if he discarded his uniform), for to accompany Aymar home he was determined. No arguments would move him from his resolve, and when Aymar spoke of his military obligations in Vendée, he shamelessly retorted, first, that they could not know, the other side of the Loire, but that he was still a prisoner; secondly, that d'Autichamp had prophesied he should never get back from Brittany, and had given him leave, in that event, to join a Breton leader; and thirdly, that in this respect he had obeyed d'Autichamp to the letter, and was now going to carry out the duties of his position. So when, on the afternoon of the second day, Royer brought them the authentic news of the great victory of the 18th of June, they resolved to start on the morrow, travelling by easy stages.

It was true that, though the period which they were afterwards to know as the Hundred Days was over, hostilities were not. In the West neither side had disbanded; they were watching each other; and in some districts of Brittany fighting was still going on. But in others the Imperialists were withdrawing, and Arbelles was said to have been evacuated already. Royer undertook to procure a vehicle of some kind in Port-Marie, but a change of attire such as M. de Courtomer would have consented to wear was not to be had. However, they proposed in any case not to start till the afternoon, and to travel only as far as the little town of Sarzeau, where they would sleep the night, and where Laurent could supply this want.

"So that we may hope you will be at Sessignes on Tuesday," he remarked to Aymar. "And then, at last, you can be properly looked after."

"And I can also begin my campaign of deception," returned Aymar. "I cannot tell them the whole truth, Laurent, so I shall have to lie . . . and they will believe me." He stared at the sea—they were just outside the cave—and added, "The person in the whole world whom I most abhor the idea of lying to is just the one person to whom I can never tell the real, the full truth."

Laurent said nothing, but he could not help wondering whether it would not really be better for his friend to follow his own instincts and conceal nothing from . . . that person. But in so delicate a matter he could hardly proffer unsought advice.

(5)

When Laurent first saw that afternoon the ramshackle conveyance in the similitude of a chaise which waited for them at the famous turning under the chestnuts he thought—and said—that it would never take them even as far as Sarzeau. And though the ancient postilion fixed Lyons or Marseilles as the goal of which it was, on the contrary, capable, Laurent was right. The wheel did not, it is true, actually leave the axle, but its intention of shortly doing so was clear enough. Hence the prophet of disaster found himself, towards dusk, a mile and a half out from Sarzeau, trying to help the postilion render the last services to the worn-out lynch-pin, and to prevent Aymar from doing the same—Aymar who would probably now have to walk into Sarzeau before he could sup.

“When this happens in romances,” observed the amateur wheelwright regretfully, “some kind Samaritan usually appears and offers hospitality.”

But it was not till a good twenty minutes later, when the wheel was on the point of being pronounced good for the short distance, that an oldish gentleman came walking briskly round the turn of the road, and, to Laurent’s surreptitiously manifested joy, did warmly press them to sup with him. It seemed that he had witnessed their plight from an upper window of his house, near by, and had issued forth with that design, so that, had they wished, it would have been difficult to reject his invitation.

So the postilion was despatched with the chaise to the inn at Sarzeau to order them a room, and, as they walked away together, the old gentleman made himself known to his guests—M. de Lanascol. Aymar and Laurent named themselves in response, and as his friend did so a slight spasm of apprehension shot across Laurent’s mind: would not the name of La Rocheterie be known to their host—what might he not have heard? But either the name meant nothing or M. de Lanascol had heard nothing.

Some half-hour later, in a large room with faded rugs and old-fashioned furniture, they were awaiting a supper which already announced itself by an appetising smell. M. de Lanascol had monarchical sympathies, as he soon divulged; indeed, having regard to Laurent’s unmistakable uniform, he would hardly have bidden the travellers else. And very

shortly, after due elation over the Allied victory and speculation as to its ultimate results (since, from what he said, it was by no means obvious yet what was going to happen in France) he was sounding that young man, in a well-bred manner, on the fighting he supposed him to have seen.

"But I have seen none, sir," avowed M. de Courtomer frankly. "I have been a prisoner since the first of May, and have not very long escaped."

"Escaped!" exclaimed the old gentleman. "Ah, you must tell me about that, Monsieur! A prisoner in Vendée, I suppose, for I am not wrong, I think, in taking you for a Vendean officer?"

"No, you are quite right. But I was captured in Brittany, after carrying despatches."

"And on the first of May, I think you said," observed M. de Lanascot. "Then you had left Vendée before the arrival there of the lamented Marquis de la Rochejaquelein? Ah, what a loss! There are rumours also, that since Sunday the Vendéans have lost another fight and another general. Yes, Vendée has been unfortunate throughout," he finished regretfully. "Really we have done better here in Brittany. Of course there have been set-backs, as for instance Sol de Grisolles' defeat at Auray only five days ago—have you heard of that?—and, just about the time that you were captured, that horrible affair at the bridge of Pont-aux-Rochers. (But that was due to treachery, as I expect you know.) Still, Brittany has gathered, I think I may justly say, more laurels than her sister."

At the mention of the fatal bridge Laurent felt the blood rushing to his face. He did not look at his companion, and yet he knew that Aymar, silent in his high-backed seventeenth-century chair, had suddenly gone rigid. He himself wished with all his heart that they had not accepted M. de Lanascot's hospitality. And the old gentleman had now transferred his attention to his other guest.

"And you, Monsieur de la Rocheterie, is it indiscreet . . . ?"

"I have taken part in the campaign, Monsieur," replied Aymar. Even in that uncomfortable moment Laurent noticed that he did not use the word 'fought.' "But, like my friend, I had the misfortune to be made prisoner near its commencement."

"Indeed!" said M. de Lanascot. "I condole with you. And . . . wounded too, I think?" For under his coat Aymar was still wearing his arm in a sling.

"Yes," said his guest rather hesitatingly. And Laurent trusted that in his zeal for exactitude he would not think it necessary to explain further.

"Severely wounded, I am afraid," hazarded M. de Lanascol with sympathetic interest. "For indeed, Monsieur, if you will pardon the remark, you look like it. I regret that I did not offer you a glass of wine on arrival, especially as our supper delays somewhat unaccountably. May I ring for one now?"

"On no account, thank you, Monsieur. I am perfectly recovered."

His host had his eyes fixed on the clear, pale visage. The daylight outside had now faded sufficiently to allow full play to the candelabra on the table at his elbow, whose radiance struck its own unmistakable colour out of Aymar's hair.

M. de Lanascol moved suddenly. "Pardon me, again, Monsieur de la Rocheterie, but if I might presume . . . pray do not take it amiss if I suggest, that, with your appearance, you should be a little cautious how you traverse the country round Locmélar. Feeling is very strong there about the disaster at Pont-aux-Rochers, and though that man L'Oiseleur was subsequently shot by his own troops for it, it is rumoured that he is still alive. I once had a glimpse of him, and you are so . . . you resemble him so strikingly—though, of course, with a great difference—that I feel a warning. . . . Please believe that I have no intention of being offensive."

In the arctic, aching silence which succeeded this speech Laurent knew not whether his own heart-beats or the ticking of the clock were the louder. Oh that they were back on the high road, at the inn, anywhere!

Aymar was on his feet. He had not flushed; his colourless face was unbetraying. "*I am . . . L'Oiseleur.* As you would evidently not wish to extend your hospitality to him, Monsieur, I will relieve you of the necessity."

He made the slightest, most formal inclination of the head, and walked towards the door. Laurent began hotly, "You are completely misinformed, Monsieur! There was no——" But Aymar stopped him with a look, and after a second he turned and silently followed him out, leaving the old gentleman apparently petrified in the act of rising from his chair.

The door of the hall stood open, for it was a very warm evening. Without a word the two went through it, and down the steps and along the straight wide path to the gates. Venus hung in the west, lovely and indifferent to human

hurts; an owl hooted in the distance. The silence between them was like heavy metal; what was there in all the world to say? Desperately Laurent cast about for the phrase that should break it, but they were walking down the avenue before he brought it out.

"We must go to the inn," he said in an almost unnaturally matter-of-fact manner. His companion did not reply for a moment. Then he said, still walking on,

"They may think me too much like 'that man L'Oiseleur' there also." His voice was curiously flat and toneless. Laurent braced himself to make his next suggestion.

"Then I will go in and order supper. Our room is ordered."

"Do," replied Aymar in the same expressionless voice. "Supper for yourself, I mean. I will follow a little later and order mine. You need not know me."

"Do you really imagine that I——" began Laurent, and then stopped with a great sigh, and, coming a little nearer as he walked, slid his arm into Aymar's and gripped it close.

They were late for the table d'hôte supper at the inn, and were served separately at the side of the room, attracting little notice. Laurent's head at least was spinning from the blow. His own side! His own side could believe a thing like that of L'Oiseleur, on hearsay, without investigation. It had not taken long to give the lie to his own arguments on that score a few days ago.

Once upstairs alone, in the room which had been reserved for them, Aymar turned on his companion.

"Laurent, this has got to end! We must say good-bye."

Laurent, already unfastening his uniform, shook his head with a smile. "I am not going to be dismissed like that!"

"You are not going to be exposed again to what happened this evening!"

"Probably not. It will not happen again. And at any rate I took no harm."

"Did you enjoy it, then?" asked Aymar, suddenly flaring up. "What do you think *I* felt like, seeing you involved in my shame?"

Laurent ceased undressing and looked at him. "If you want me to leave you on account of your own feelings," he said gently, "I suppose I must consider it."

There was an oaken coffer standing at the foot of the four-poster bed. Aymar sat down on it without a word, and covered his eyes with his hand.

"Must I consider it, Aymar?" asked Laurent after a long pause. (He had thought he could control his voice better than that.)

"Not if you can . . . bear with me," replied Aymar, in a voice still less under his own management; and, turning, he hid his face for a moment against the end of the bed.

Nothing more was said about parting.

(6)

But neither of them woke next day with any very pleasurable anticipations. And Laurent, when he went out to buy himself some civilian clothes, ordered a post-chaise for the rest of the journey rather than face the diligence and the chance of L'Oiseleur's being recognised; since, as Aymar had already sardonically remarked, "This cursed red hair of mine makes me a little too conspicuous, does it not? And if I meet any Royalist officers, who knows whether they may not try to arrest me?"

The very idea turned Laurent cold. It was not, however, possible to avoid travellers altogether. And when they took their places at midday at the one long table in the inn at Piriac they were aware of more than travellers—Imperialist, not Royalist, officers, three of them, all in the blue with black facings of the engineers. But a moment's reflection convinced Laurent that he and Aymar, in their civilian garb, had nothing to fear from them. In any case it was doubtful whether the Bonapartists would have the wish to arrest them—even if they had the means.

As the meal progressed Laurent found himself studying the face of the senior officer, a spare, stern-looking man of about forty-five, a face which, in spite of his thinking it at first somewhat dauntingly severe, ended by attracting him.

"Rather a different type over there from our cherished host at Arbelles," he whispered to Aymar. But Aymar did not reply, for as Laurent spoke there came the comfortable voice of the innkeeper from behind them, where he was carving at a buffet.

"Take this to Colonel Richard!" And, while Laurent gasped, a plate was borne down the table and placed before the object of his criticism.

He hardly dared to look at Aymar beside him; but he was aware that the latter had ceased any pretence at a meal. He

sat for some time with his head bent, crumbling his bread, very pale; after a while he leant back in his chair, and looked at Colonel Richard with a scrutiny far more intense than Laurent had bestowed upon him. The Bonapartist, now finishing his wine, did not seem to notice it; yet Laurent had the impression that very little escaped those keen eyes.

"Shall we go?" he whispered at last. But Aymar shook his head. And they sat on, though many travellers had left the table.

Suddenly Aymar turned to him. "Will you wait for me here?" he whispered. "I shall ask Colonel Richard for a few minutes' conversation. He may refuse, of course, but if not——"

"Aymar, are you mad!" exclaimed Laurent. "He might do worse than refuse! For Heaven's sake don't expose yourself to such possibilities!"

"I must," answered Aymar; but his lips seemed dry as he spoke. "It is an opportunity such as I could not have dreamt of.—There he goes!"

And Laurent, scarcely believing his eyes, saw him get up and intercept the colonel of engineers before he got to the door, and say something to him. From the short but courteous assent which Colonel Richard appeared to give, it was plain that, in spite of the 'cursed red hair,' he had no idea of the identity of the young man asking for an interview. They left the room together.

How could Aymar do a thing like that in cold blood, even for *her*!—for of course he was going to try to ensure his enemy's silence. The sheer courage of it took Laurent's breath away. What might Colonel Richard not say to him when he learnt who he was! Laurent was certain that no woman, not even Mme de Villecresne, could grasp the depth of self-abnegation involved in such an act to a spirit as proud and sensitive as La Rocheterie's. But Aymar was like—what was that line in Shakespeare about the Toledo blade . . . about the 'sword of Spain' that had 'the ice-brook's temper' . . . ?

(7)

The adversaries who had never met went out together into the inn garden. There was in it a tunnel-like arbour, such as is not uncommon in French country hostelries; it was covered with a vine, and contained a rough table with

a bench on either side. Colonel Richard threw a glance within, and saying, "We shall be undisturbed here, I think, Monsieur," led the way in.

The sun came greenly through the beautiful vine-leaves behind the Imperialist's severe, upright head. Aymar looked him in the face and said, "I must tell you first who I am. You will think it strange of me to seek you out like this, but I shall not keep you long. My name is La Rocheterie."

The dry, rough-edged vine-leaves seemed to twitter in the little breeze; there was no other sound for a few seconds. Aymar did not see Colonel Richard's face; it had vanished suddenly in a light green mist. But he heard his voice saying curtly, "We might as well sit down, Monsieur de la Rocheterie," and in a moment more he saw that the Imperialist had done so. But he himself remained on his feet.

"It is not worth it, Monsieur. I have only to say——"

He broke off short. A paralysing idea had just occurred to him. He was going to ask a favour of this man, who must despise him from his heart, who might not improbably have him thrown out of the place altogether. And surely it would seem to the Bonapartist that he would never dare to do such a thing had he not believed himself to have a claim on his opponent . . . for the victory he had put within his grasp?

Even the clear vine-leaves vanished this time. He felt some, however, in his left hand. . . . And once more he heard Colonel Richard's voice, saying, "I think, Monsieur de la Rocheterie, that if we are to conduct this interview to any purpose, you had better sit down!"

And to this, lest the whole conversation should continue in this curious manner, with a person whom one heard but could not see, Aymar's brain assented. He found himself sitting on the opposite bench, the table between them, and in his left hand two vine-leaves and a portion of a third. He did not know how they had come there.

"That is better," said the Bonapartist, looking at him very hard indeed. He had eyes like cold, clear water—eyes that would make short work of treachery. "Well, what is it that you were going to say?"

The voice, the eyes, steadied Aymar. He began again, and his own voice was as cold as the other's.

"The letter addressed to me which was brought to you, Monsieur, at the *Cheval Blanc* near Saint-Goazec on the night of the 27th of April——"

"—Excuse me!" broke in the Imperialist, leaning forward, "but if you have come to tell me that that letter never really came from you . . ." He paused for a second, and Ayamar went on quickly, "That was not in the least my intention. If any messenger on that occasion tried to take on himself any responsibility he was quite unjustified. I alone was responsible for sending the letter."

There had been a light in the eyes looking at him. It died down now as Colonel Richard said, "I was going on to remark that I have been hoping, ever since Pont-aux-Rochers, that there had been some mistake, and that some day I should hear it. I should not be very hard to convince that there had been. . . . You say the responsibility for that act, Monsieur, was yours alone. One has sometimes to shoulder unmerited responsibility; any soldier knows that. I would so much rather think that that had been the case."

Ayamar met his gaze full. It was not entirely cold after all.

"I am sorry," he answered steadily. "You are very kind. But . . . I sent the letter—knowingly. I myself . . . deciphered those passages." He had taken his arm out of the sling, and began to arrange his three vine-leaves on the table, the broken fragment in the middle. "It is of my motive in sending it that I wish to speak to you, if you will allow it."

Colonel Richard had an elbow on the table now. Shading his eyes with his hand, he motioned to him to proceed.

And Ayamar left his pattern for the moment, gripping the edge of the table instead. "Am I wrong in fancying, Monsieur, that you have kept silence on that point, my motive? I have been a prisoner, and scarcely know yet what reports are going about, but I was in the hands of those who would not have scrupled to take full advantage of the knowledge, if they had had it. They did not seem to have it. . . . Might I know that I have not been deluding myself?"

For a moment the whole of existence seemed to turn on the answer to that question. And instead of answering it his enemy might say, and with justification, "Why should I tell you that? Are you trying to drive another bargain with me?"

The almost unendurable tension ended at last. "No, you have not been deluding yourself," said Colonel Richard slowly. "I promised your emissary that the lady should know nothing. I kept that promise; but as it happens I

have done more. I mean, that no one else knows for whose sake you made your disastrous venture—nor indeed that it was made for the sake of any single person. And, as I have kept silence till now, I shall continue to keep it.”

“Thank you,” said Aymar; and for the moment could say no more. The vine-leaves were in shreds by now. But after a silence he went on, “That is almost more than I dared to hope. If that lady can be spared the knowledge, I shall be . . . I am . . . most profoundly grateful to you.”

Under the shading hand he could see the older man’s mouth contract. Colonel Richard probably wished to get rid of him as soon as possible, so Aymar took hold of the table to pull himself up.

The other instantly removed his hand. “Oblige me by staying a moment, Monsieur de la Rocheterie! There are one or two things I should like to say to you. Will you tell me what you had up your sleeve when you sent that letter?”

Aymar did stay—and very still. “Why should I have had anything up my sleeve, Monsieur?”

“Because it is quite incredible that you should have made me an unconditional present of your men’s lives? I thought so at the time—I think so more than ever now. You had some counterplan connected with their presence at the bridge; I am sure of it.”

“What does that matter now?” asked Aymar with a long breath, and swept the torn vine-leaves into a heap.

Colonel Richard leant over the table. “But you would oblige me greatly if you would answer my question. To me it seems that we have gone too far to leave the business there.” And, as Aymar still did not answer, he said, half impatiently, half gently, “Well then, as you seem determined not to defend yourself, Monsieur de la Rocheterie, take a further step still, and assure me that you intended your men to be ambushed, that you did not do everything in your power to prevent it! Come now, why did your plan fail?”

Aymar lifted his head and met the keen, half-compassionate eyes for a second. Then, very briefly, he told his story to his adversary.

There was a silence in which even the vine-leaves did not stir.

“Monsieur de la Rocheterie,” said the man on the other side of the table at last, “will you allow me, as an old soldier with, I suppose, twenty years the disadvantage of you, to give you a piece of advice?”

Aymar, who had put his head back against the trellis, nodded, a little bewildered. This was fantastic—and yet very real.

"Ask for a court-martial, or rather, a court of enquiry!"

But at that the young man moved and flushed. "Impossible, sir."

"Why? Not, I am sure, that you would not face it? You seem to me, if I may be allowed to judge from what you are doing now, to possess a very rare kind of courage. Why do you say that a court-martial is impossible?"

The flush was deeper this time. "You are much too generous," said Aymar with some difficulty. "For a moment, after the disaster, a court-martial did seem the only way out, and I gave up my sword for that purpose to my second-in-command. But since then the case has been . . . judged . . ." (his voice failed him entirely for a second) ". . . and besides, I have had time to reflect. A court-martial would involve telling the whole truth—my motive for sending you the information. It would be absurd and odious to invite an enquiry and then to conceal a vital fact. Yet if I tell the whole truth I do the thing I most want to avoid—bring that lady's name into the business, so that she cannot fail to learn just what I pray she may never learn. You see that, Colonel, surely?"

"Perfectly. But have you reflected that, by concealing your motive for doing what you did, you are laying yourself open to the imputation of its being a far more disgraceful one than it was?"

"I have reflected." His mouth set itself. "The imputation has already been made."

"And you are going on like that? What about other people's feelings? You have a right, perhaps, to immolate your own, but you have kindred, I expect?"

"I have not forgotten them," answered Aymar, and for a moment he looked out of the green-framed doorway into the sunshine beyond. "I should indeed be selfish if I refused any means, however nearly intolerable, if they would clear me. But it is just my . . . motive, which seems to me to render the case hopeless from the first. If I could go before a court-martial and relate a story of a plan that miscarried, I might hope to be believed and acquitted, even though . . . even though I have since been shot by my own men. But to admit that the scheme was directed to saving a woman's—a kinswoman's—life . . . how could I hope, after its disastrous

failure, to obtain acquittal on those grounds?—Would you acquit me, Colonel Richard?"

The Imperialist was looking thoughtfully at the table, one thin sinewy hand supporting his head, the fingers of the other drumming lightly on the wood. "I don't know—I don't know. It is a difficult case. Dispassionately considered I suppose—but hardly any tribunal is really dispassionate. However, I do recognise that you are not condemning yourself to obloquy entirely for the sake of sparing someone else's feelings—which in the end would obviously be the last result you would achieve by such a course. . . . I have seen that done with such fatal results, Monsieur, that you must excuse my perhaps unwarrantable interference in your private affairs. I hope you will excuse it in any case?"

"Excuse it!" exclaimed Aymar rather hoarsely. "I have no words to thank you for your kindness! I shall never forget it. I . . ." For an instant he put a hand over his eyes, then, removing it, went on, "But I should like to ask you a question in my turn. How was it that in your first interview with my messenger, earlier on that evening, he gained from you the impression that the lady was in serious danger, an impression which was so much strengthened, immediately afterwards, by one of your subalterns . . . to my cost?"

Colonel Richard abruptly got up and began to walk up and down the narrow arbour.

"I would rather you asked me any question but that, Monsieur de la Rocheterie."

"But I want to know," said Aymar faintly. "It has been such an enigma to me, how the idea ever arose that you intended to shoot her."

"If you will be persuaded by me you will not insist on knowing now."

"It is my only chance of learning the truth," urged L'Oiseleur. He was getting quite dazed with strain and fatigue.

But when Colonel Richard had finished it was not fatigue of which he was conscious. His head was propped on his clenched fists, his face invisible, and the elder man was leaning against the table with his back to him.

"Now you know why I almost regretted Pont-aux-Rochers," said the latter, looking at the floor, "and why I wished I had not let my officers know from whom I had the

information which led to it . . . and most of all did I regret that I had allowed your lieutenant to have that letter back again, when I heard——”

“What had happened to me in consequence,” supplied Aymar in an almost extinguished voice. He raised a face that matched it. “Yes, I understand. But you are excessively punctilious, Colonel Richard. Others will not judge so mercifully.”

“They cannot, if you refuse to defend yourself.”

“I have already explained to you why I cannot. And what you have just told me will hardly render my defence more easy, will it?” He gave the ghost of a laugh. “My God! it makes me almost a figure in a farce! But I thank you—I thank you for everything.” And this time he got successfully to his feet.

“There is no need to thank me,” said Colonel Richard almost curtly. “Have I not to end with an apology? But of what use is it to be ashamed when what is done is done?” He seemed to be struggling a trifle for his own self-control; and then abruptly changed the subject. “You are not travelling unaccompanied, I hope?”

“By no means. I have a friend with me.”

“You have just been released, I presume,”

“Not precisely. It was ten days ago . . . if you can call it release.”

“So long ago as that? Then I should say it was . . . somewhat premature. But for that very reason I must not keep you standing longer.” He held out his hand. “Will you shake hands with me?” And, as Aymar coloured and hesitated, he added, “—if you feel that you can do so, after the confession I have just made you. Apart from that, there is no reason, is there, why you should not take my hand?”

He had gone again—into that curious mist. But Aymar felt his grasp, returned it, and heard him say, “I have never been so sorry about anything in my life as about this business—I would offer you my arm to the inn, but it might not, in the future, do you any good if we seemed to be on terms of intimacy. But get your friend, I beg you, to give you a glass of wine at once . . . I wish you—your sword again!”

Then Aymar himself was walking carefully up the inn garden.

"It was worth it," he said a few minutes later to Laurent in the deserted dining-room, trying to smile. "He has told no one—will tell no one now. And he was kind—wonderfully—gave me advice . . . even shook hands with me. . . . Yes, incredibly kind."

Laurent drew a long breath of relief. "But, after all, you are L'Oiseleur! And what was the Moulin Brûlé to this?"

Aymar stared at the wine-glass he had just emptied. "But I got more out of the interview than I bargained for; something that I think I would rather not have had after all."

"Not Colonel Richard's handshake, surely?"

"No. Colonel Richard's avowal."

(8)

That evening, as they took their places for supper in the inn at their next stage, two gentlemen sitting at the neighbouring table finishing their wine suddenly broke off their conversation, stared, and then, after exchanging glances, got up and left the place altogether.

For a moment Aymar looked as though he had been struck in the face; the next, he was showing an almost uncanny self-control. "I knew that man quite well once," he observed quietly, and did not refer to the incident again during the meal.

But that he hardly slept that night Laurent was aware. As they were dressing next morning he suddenly remarked rather dryly, "I imagine that yesterday evening, Laurent, must have finally convinced you of the baselessness of your optimistic views about Royalists. You see that what damns me—what you overlooked, perhaps—is my own men's having shot me." And as Laurent admitted that this rumour had, unfortunately, had two months in which to spread uncontradicted, Aymar retorted, "*Rumour*. It is fact! And how, therefore, can it ever be contradicted?"

So little answer could Laurent find to this observation that he resolved to go to no inn at all that day—the last of their journey—but procured instead a fowl and a bottle of wine to take with them. They halted, therefore, at midday on the outskirts of a wood, and, leaving their chaise, turned a little way up a grassy road which penetrated it. Laurent, bearing the provisions, selected a suitable spot for their consumption under a spreading tree. "You can lean your

back against this very comfortably," he announced to his friend, who was following with bent head.

Aymar looked up—and advanced no more.

"Don't you like this place?" asked Laurent, surprised at his expression.

"It is . . . too much in the shade, don't you think?" replied L'Oiseleur indistinctly. "If you don't mind—there—more in the open." And, without waiting for consent, he turned and went back towards the grassy road.

They ate and drank and did not hurry to regain their vehicle. Aymar indeed disposed himself on his face, his head on his bent left arm, and Laurent settled himself against a fallen tree-trunk, and pulled his hat over his eyes. He was a little sleepy.

"I did that man who would not stay in the same room with me a service once," came Aymar's voice suddenly. "He said that he should never forget it. But I suppose the debt is liquidated by my death. For, as I say, Laurent, it was not Pont-aux-Rochers which put an end to me, but the Bois des Fauvettes. I shall erect a tombstone there one day to L'Oiseleur.—But who, I wonder, am I?"

His tone was quiet and reflective; he pulled at a blade of grass as he lay there. And Laurent, nearly as quietly, cursed in French and English the man to whom Aymar had once rendered a service.

"That does no good," observed Aymar. "And if you want to swear at anyone . . . Tell me, Laurent, are you at all given to practical joking? If so, let me relate to you the story of a very successful effort of that kind; it is rather instructive."

"But I don't——" began Laurent. Aymar disregarded him.

"There was a young man the other day—a soldier, an officer, I don't know his name—who had a great turn for that sort of thing, and a tolerable gift of playing a part. Happening to be quartered with others one evening at an inn, he was witness of the arrival of a somewhat perturbed old gentleman, come to make enquiries about a lady of his acquaintance, who had been forbidden for a short time to proceed on her journey—as much for her own sake as for any other reason, since the road was required for troops——"

"Aymar!"

"Don't interrupt me, please! The old gentleman came out from his interview with the subaltern's major in a state of

panic. He had mistaken the major for the colonel in command, the major had been short with him—bored by the old man's quite needless alarm about the lady, who meanwhile was peaceably sitting in her room upstairs. It occurred to this young officer that it would be excellent fooling to raise this simple old gentleman's fears to an even higher pitch, and utilising the fact that a woman spy really had been shot by his own side a little before, and making a vague statement about the lady's past which happened to fit the case, he succeeded in so thoroughly terrifying his victim into the belief of her imminent execution that . . . but perhaps I need not go on."

"Aymar," came at last from Laurent in a tone of horror, "you do not mean to say that this is the whole explanation of the mystery about Mme de Villecresne's danger—the whole cause of . . . everything?"

"Yes," responded L'Oiseleur unemotionally. "Nothing but that; a successful practical joke, helped out by circumstances, played in the first place on a timid and credulous nature, and then, through him, on one perhaps as credulous—too blind to hazards . . . too fond of them, it may be . . ."

Laurent felt frozen in the sunshine. "Was this detestable tale Colonel Richard's avowal of yesterday?"

"Yes. But of course he had no hand whatever in the imposture, and was horrified when he discovered it, which did not happen fully till after the fight. He was not at the *Cheval Blanc* at all, you see; he was quartered at the presbytère, where Vaubernier found him when he went back with the letter and asked for him by name. But, naturally, when information was offered him he was not going to refuse it. He could well assent to the 'bargain,' promise not to shoot the lady of whose detention at the inn he was not even aware! By sending anyone as stupid and gullible as the old Marquis into this business the gods may have been looking for amusement. If so, I think they must have found it."

His voice ceased, and he lay without moving as before. The sun streamed down on the unprotected bronze head, and Laurent saw the gleam of it all iridescent, for there were tears in his eyes. All that, those terrible and still unfinished consequences of ruin and suffering—and those not to Aymar alone—the fruit of nothing more than a moment's heartless jocularly . . . it was cruel, utterly and sickeningly cruel! If only he had that inhuman young scoundrel here to shoot—

steel was too good for him! He would like to stand him up yonder against a tree, and began fiercely selecting one for the purpose, pitching without reflection on that which he had originally chosen for their own resting-place. . . . And then, as he looked at it, it came to him why Aymar could not bring himself to approach it. Blunderer that he had been . . . it was a beech tree!

He stared at it with hostility. Would the spring ever mean again to Aymar what the spring ought to mean, or would he never in his life see its green leaves except through a mist of blood and shame? He looked down at him again. His head was still pillowed on his arm, and he seemed to be asleep. . . . And he could do nothing for him; indeed it was now clear that, immediately he had got him safely to Sessignes, he would have to leave him. M. de Lanascot's news of further misfortunes in Vendée was confirmed—they had heard it this morning. And just because all there was in such disarray Laurent felt it obligatory on him to return, if he could, and Aymar concurred in this feeling. Yes, he must leave him—to what?

A step on the green track made him look up from his contemplation, and he saw that a man was coming out of the wood—a peasant with a bundle slung on his shoulder, leaning on a long stick. He walked wearily, and he was dusty; his face looked pinched and ill, and his left hand was muffled in a bandage. He seemed about thirty-five.

As he came abreast his pace slackened, and Laurent saw that his left hand was not bandaged—for he had no left hand at all. It was the stump that was wound about. He looked so tired and forlorn that Laurent held out the remains of the fowl and the loaf—without speaking, for he did not want to disturb his friend.

But the wayfarer took no notice whatever of this proffered charity. His eyes were fixed with an extraordinary eagerness on the prone form beside the giver and, exactly at the moment when Laurent recognised this, the man let his staff fall, and said hoarsely, pointing down at the russet hair,

“Who is that—for the love of the Virgin, Monsieur, who is that?”

Into Laurent's mind leaped instantly M. de Lanascot's warning. He jumped up, and got between the enquirer and his quarry.

“What do you want with him?” he asked rather roughly. “No,” as the man tried to move past him, “not till you tell

me your business!" And he seized him by the shoulders.

But Aymar, behind him, was already on his feet. "Let him go, mon ami; it is a friend . . . and a friend I thought I had lost! Eveno!"

He held out his hand, his voice a little breathless. The peasant twisted himself free from Laurent's hold, and dropping at Aymar's feet, kissed them with a sob.

"I heard that you were wounded, L'Oiseleur, and a prisoner—and I was going to Sessignes to ask. You *are* wounded . . . but free . . . and alive . . . thank God, thank His Mother!"

The passionate devotion that throbbed through his words almost disconcerted Laurent, no half-hearted adherent himself, but he could see that Aymar accepted quite simply even this extreme manifestation. Only, looking down at his follower with evident relief and pleasure, his face suddenly changed. He touched him on the shoulder.

"Did you lose that hand at Pont-aux-Rochers, Eveno?" And there was the sharpest pain in his tone.

"Afterwards, Monsieur le Vicomte. They cut it off at Saint-Goazec. It was nothing; they were very kind to me. If we had won at the bridge—if *you* had been there—I would not give a sou for it . . . But *your* arm . . . you are ill yet . . . have you not been very ill, Monsieur Aymar?"

His hand slid caressingly along his leader's sound arm. Aymar stepped back.

"Eveno, that hand of yours is my doing. I was responsible for Pont-aux-Rochers—nobody else. I planned it, and the plan——" He turned his head away.

The peasant's face lit up as he knelt there. "You planned it! We thought it was a mistake of M. de Fresne's. But if it was your plan, L'Oiseleur, there is nothing to regret. You could have had both my hands!"

So the carriage, when they started again, contained Jacques Eveno also, for in spite of his protests Aymar had insisted on conveying him to his home, a plan which necessitated only a slight detour, since he lived with his old father on the borders of a wood about seven miles from Sessignes.

In the vehicle, therefore, he sat, dusty and abashed, answering his leader's questions about his treatment and his comrades' fate, but gazing all the while at L'Oiseleur with the eyes of idolatry. And, mainly for his friend's sake, Laurent was relieved to gather from what he said that the actual

death-roll of Pont-aux-Rochers was much lighter than might have been expected.

Just as Aymar was instructing Eveno to come to Sessignes in a day or two to help him make a list of casualties, the chaise stopped. Aymar got out as well as the Chouan, and Laurent followed their example. He saw the smoke ascending blue from a thatched cottage against fir trees, a path going into a wood, and two saddle-horses, one of them a beautiful bay mare, tied to an oak. Aymar, saying farewell to Eveno, did not appear to have noticed these, but suddenly the mare pricked her ears, threw up her head and whinnied.

Aymar turned. "Hirondelle!" he exclaimed, and made at once for the oak tree, the mare, when she saw him coming, whinnying again and lifting up a suppliant forefoot. But before he got up to her her master stopped, perhaps only perceiving in that moment what Laurent had already noticed, that it was a lady's saddle she was carrying.

At the same moment a man—a groom or servant of some kind—ran round the chaise and gripped Eveno by the arm. "Jacques!" he exclaimed breathlessly, "is it M. le Vicomte? Thank God! We have been so anxious, and this very afternoon Mme la Comtesse has ridden over to see if by chance your father had any news, but he has gone to the village, so she is waiting . . . I beg your pardon, Monsieur: I did not see you!"

"Had you not better tell M. de la Rocheterie?" suggested Laurent.

But Hirondelle's saddle, evidently, had told Aymar already, or else he had overheard. Laurent just saw him stooping his head to enter at the low door.

(9)

It would be rather dark inside old Eveno's cottage; Aymar knew that. And she would be sitting on the settle by the hearth, waiting for the old man's arrival, and at the sound of the latch she would turn; and, not expecting him, would not perhaps recognise him at once, so that he must try not to startle her. And then . . . what came then? Not, at any rate, what would have happened in the orchard last April, before the lightning struck him down from the pinnacle of his happiness. Now there could only be such difficult greeting as a disgraced man could offer the woman

he loved, who did not know the cloud upon him. . . . But perhaps she did? It might be easier then.

All these considerations swam through Aymar's mind between lifting the latch and pushing open the door.

Inside it was not quite as he had thought it would be. For Avoye was kneeling by the hearth in her long riding-habit, trying to revive old Eveno's dying fire for him, and in the creak and groan of the ancient bellows the lifting of the latch was lost. He had a second or two to contemplate that picture ere he stepped down the two uneven steps from the door.

"Avoye!" he said gently.

The bellows fell, breathing their soul out; and his cousin, still kneeling there, but with her head turned, made a little inarticulate sound and clasped her hands together.

"I am afraid I startled you," he said after a moment; for he must speak to steady his own composure. "I did not know that you were here till I saw Hironnelle. I came to bring back Jacques Eveno, whom I met on the road. He has been released, like . . . like me!"

And now she had got up, and was facing him, very pale. Still without speaking she held out both her hands. Aymar came nearer and took and kissed them.

"Tell me that I did not frighten you, my dear, coming in so suddenly?"

Two large tears brimmed slowly out of her wide eyes and slid down her cheeks. "You did not frighten me then . . . but now . . . you do. Oh, Aymar, to have you back, but . . . but looking . . ." She put a hand to her throat. "You must have been terribly wounded."

He held her other hand still. He might do that, surely!

"No. Only it was a long business, and needed nursing. I had that unstintedly—from the friend whom I am bringing now to Sessignes with me, and whom I want you to know well, and like."

But whether she took this in he could not tell.

"To have you back, Aymar—to have you back!" But in her eyes the alarm outshone the joy.

"Is Bonne-maman well?" he asked, dropping her hand at last. "I am afraid that I have caused you both a great deal of anxiety. . . . Will you drive back with us, Avoye? I have a chaise outside."

"Yes, of course I will return with you. And Eveno is there too? How pleased the old man will be! But I thought that——" She broke off, looking puzzled.

"No, we were not imprisoned at the same place," said Aymar quickly. "I will explain about that afterwards. But I had better tell you now, before you see him, that Eveno has lost a hand."

"Oh, poor Jacques! Was that . . . because of Pont-aux-Rochers?" He nodded.

"Poor Jacques!" she said again, the tears in her eyes. "Still, he might have been killed." And then, moved to it perhaps by what she saw in his sad, changed face, she said, with some of Aymar's own occasional vehemence, "And, anyhow, it is a thousand times worse for you—a thousand times!"

He caught his breath. Yes, but for whom was it going to be worst of all in the end—whom, at least, was he going to hurt most? The way, the desolating way before him, lay over her tender and faithful heart.

She was gazing at him with eyes of such compassion that he could hardly bear it; she was speaking too. "Dearest, will you sit down for a moment—only for a moment? There is something that I must ask you before we start for home (especially if you have a companion) and I cannot have you standing, looking as you do."

She indicated the settle. He sat down. God knew what she was going to ask him; there would be so many things! She sat beside him and was about to put her hand on his arm, saw that it was bandaged, touched it instead with the lightest, most impalpable gesture of caress, and said, "I only want you to tell me this, if you are free to tell it. We have heard rumours . . . almost more than rumours . . . that your defeat at Pont-aux-Rochers was due to treachery. Oh, Aymar, say that it is not true!"

Aymar put his head back in the corner of the high-backed settle and closed his eyes. But he answered firmly, "No, it is not true. There was no treachery. But you will hear it said everywhere, *Avoye*." Should he tell her more? She would have to know it—unless indeed she knew it already. . . . It became for an instant a question as to whether he could tell her. . . .

"What is the matter?" she asked, with alarm in her voice.

So then he had to go on. He opened his eyes. "And you will hear some say that the treachery was . . . *mine*!"

"*Aymar!*"

"You had not heard that yet? . . . I will tell you the

reason directly I can. Only you will recognise, Avoye, that, with this stain on my honour, I cannot regard myself at present as . . . as what I was at no time worthy to be. . . .”

His will uttered the words, because his will had always intended that they should be uttered, but as he said them it seemed to him as if all the blood left him was being drained out of his body.

Avoye had turned very pale too. “But is not that rather a matter for me to decide? You know what I should think of so wicked a slander.”

He shook his head, because he could hardly speak, and her proximity was getting more than his resolution could endure. So he slipped to one knee on the hearth and took up the abandoned bellows. “This fire is nearly out,” he murmured. And as he blew the grey wood ashes stirred and eddied like ghosts; there was no glimmer underneath. The fire was out.

And on the settle Avoye de Villecresne, pressing her hands together, was saying to herself, “You a traitor . . . *you!* They *dare* to say such a thing!”

Aymar abruptly threw down the bellows and got to his feet.

“We must not tell Grand’mère. Are you ready to go, dear, or do you still wish to see old Eveno?”

She rose. “I am ready to go with you, Aymar,” she said, in the sweet voice which sometimes held an echo of childhood. And she added, very low, “Always.” But the voice which pronounced that word was a woman’s.

Aymar heard; he looked at her with eyes of agony and ardour, lit with the flame of whose intensity she had never been quite aware, so carefully had it been controlled. He said, “Yes . . . it might be *always* now—since April. . . . Oh, my God, that it could be April again!”

And with that cry he caught her fiercely in his arms.

But the kiss was not fierce; it was the kiss that should have been given and taken under the stars in the orchard, clean and passionate and unprofaned. There was only one. Then Avoye dropped her head upon his breast. “My heart!” she murmured to his heart. And Aymar said, in a voice she had never heard from him before, “Beloved, your mouth is like apple blossom.” For he was conscious just then of nothing but what he held in his arms. It *was* April again—for a few instants. All the horror and the stain were swept

away; he had his brief moment of rapture, as intense as if she had come to him that spring evening, and as pure.

But it was very brief. The truth surged back upon him ten times more bitter for the ecstasy. He loosed his hold of her almost as if he were suddenly paralysed; but her little hands were holding him fast by the lapels of his coat, and all he could see was the top of her head, with its crown of burnished hair. Yet, though they were so close to each other, an icy stream seemed to Aymar to drive between them, of such a deadly cold that it sucked the breath from his heart.

"Let me go, Avoye!" he said, putting his hands on hers that held him, and the sharp change in his voice made her look up in alarm. Her arms went about him very quickly, and, before he quite knew what had happened, he was sitting once more at her side on the settle. But his head, this time, was resting on her shoulder.

Even this he ought not to permit himself. But it was so paradisiacally sweet, so unspeakably restful, and he was so tired.

"I should not have let you stand," the low voice like the song of a brook was saying in his ear. "Oh, my dearest, now that you are returned, and I can nurse you back to health..."

"I am tiring you," he murmured, and tried to move; but she held him.

"No, no, I am as strong as a rock. . . . You have a friend, you say, who nursed you? Aymar, I envy him!"

"Little to envy," he got out, and tried again to move. But he seemed to have neither strength nor will.

Avoye's glance fell on his attenuated hand, lying inert and open in her lap. Her own closed on it. "Aymar, what a hand! And cold! Oh, my dear, my dear!" She caught it to her breast as if to warm it. "And this bandaged arm . . ."

He said nothing, and for a few moments they both sat in absolute silence by the dead hearth. Then he made a great effort, lifted his head, and drew himself away. It was like leaving the gates of Eden, for he knew that he would never sit like that again with his head on her shoulder, with that heavenly feeling of being cared for by her who had always been his first care. And it was his own act which had shut those gates . . . betrayed to it by just that care for her. If he had been a really honourable man he would not have entered Eden now, even for these few blessed moments.

And something was stabbing at his mind, so weary now that it was difficult to discover what it was. At last he captured the thorn.

"Avoye, I have not yet asked after M. de Vaubernier? Is he . . . well?"

She gave a little soft, half-amused laugh, which showed instantly that she had no sinister associations with him. "Poor Godfather! At the beginning of May he suffered so from sciatica and rheumatism that he went off to Aix-les-Bains, and he has not yet come back. I saw him just before he left; he seemed very gloomy indeed, so I hope that Aix has cheered him up."

Aymar's heart resumed beating. He got up slowly from the settle.

"You know, my darling, that we must be keeping the Evenos out of their cottage, and there is M. de Courtomer waiting. We ought to go."

She seized her hat and riding-whip. "And you are tired to death, Aimé."

It was an old childish variant of his name. She slipped her hand into his, in childhood's fashion too, as he went to open the door. Just as he unlatched it she said, glancing back at the dim interior, "I shall come back here one day on pilgrimage."

But he whose kiss had sanctified the place for her was silent. A man did not make a pilgrimage to the spot where he had broken his resolve.

(10)

Laurent, walking restlessly up and down by the chaise, saw them coming at length—Aymar and the woman who was all the world to him . . . and who must, by virtue of that distinction, be very specially set apart from any of her sex. She was also the cause of all that had come upon him; Laurent could almost wish that she knew it. And, plainly, she was also the lady of the Tuileries garden. As she came nearer, holding up her long habit, Laurent saw that she had a face that a man might die for—a man like Aymar at all events. . . .

Then Aymar himself was saying, "Avoye, this is Monsieur le Comte de Courtomer, to whose care I owe my life," and Laurent had bowed over her hand. She gave him a charming smile, a little grave, and said, "That is too valuable a posses-

sion to us, Monsieur de Courtomer, to be paid for in mere thanks. I am glad that you are at least accompanying us to Sessignes." And while Laurent was answering rather confusedly that M. de la Rocheterie owed his life, on the contrary, to their good doctor, Aymar himself went off to give orders about the saddle-horses.

Directly he was out of earshot Mme de Villecresne came much closer. "Monsieur de Courtomer, his appearance has horrified me! For God's sake assure me that there is nothing which care cannot put right—no deadly injury, nothing irreparable!"

"Nothing, on my honour as a gentleman," replied Laurent earnestly. "He is very weak still, but that is all"—"save for mental torment," he added to himself, as Aymar, returning, announced that Eveno had gone off in search of his father, and that they could start.

It was soon blessedly plain to Laurent, as they drove along, that Mme de Villecresne had no intention of asking any awkward questions, either of or in front of L'Oiseleur. Whatever she had learnt in the cottage her love, at least, had suffered no hurt there. Despite her visible anxiety, there was a kind of submerged radiance about her which would have told anybody that. As for Aymar, he gave the impression of having been far away and of having incompletely returned. He said very little. But Laurent was not conscious, as he had expected, of being *de trop* in their company. The atmosphere of care and tenderness which Mme de Villecresne gradually diffused seemed to include him too, and the perfectly unwarrantable bias which he cherished against her began to be shaken.

He could study her more at his leisure now. She had much the same colouring as Aymar, but otherwise the resemblance between them was not striking. Her hair, where the riding-hat showed it, was brighter than his, and her eyes were less unusual; they were grey . . . or violet? It was not till later that he noticed in her too that free and noble carriage of the head which was one of Aymar's most striking characteristics. But he did observe, as she talked to him, both the sweetness of her expression and the air of resolution which seemed somehow to reside in her little pointed chin.

They were at their journey's end before Laurent realised the fact, or had obtained that distant view of the château which he had promised himself. By that time Aymar's extreme fatigue was so impossible to disguise that his cousin

decreed he should go straight to his room before seeing his grandmother, and she would present M. de Courtomer.

But these plans were disordered, directly they entered the hall, through the agency of the huge dog who first leapt upon his master with such an impact that he sent him staggering, and then set up so tremendous a pæan of joy that the whole house seemed to reverberate with it. It was hardly surprising that, by the time quiet was restored, an old lady stood in a doorway, a little Dresden china image, saying, "Why has Sarrasin been allowed out of the stables? . . . Good God, is that—*Aymar!*"

L'Oiseleur dragged himself to kiss her hand. Laurent saw the delicate colour go completely from her face, and he guessed that nobody there existed for her at all in that moment save her grandson. She caught him by the wrist.

"Go up to your room at once!" she said with a catch of the breath. "Where is Anselme?"

"I have sent for him, Grand'mère," answered Mme de Villecresne. "Yes, Aymar is very tired."

"*Tired!*" ejaculated Mme de la Rocheterie.

"Is it not allowed, Grand'mère?" interposed Aymar with the best smile that he could muster. "However, I will go and rest a little, but first—Monsieur de Courtomer!"

Laurent came forward, still feeling that he had no existence. But there was nothing to complain of in the Vicomtesse de la Rocheterie's reception of him, for all that. She belonged to an age which had valued good breeding above anything else in the world . . . except the privilege of dispensing with it at will.

CHAPTER VIII

THE LOVE OF WOMEN

"You must have been most miserable
To be so cruel."

E. B. BROWNING, *Aurora Leigh*.

(I)

How is it that the Fate who spins seems sometimes to take pleasure in falsifying, not only one's anticipations, but even one's apprehensions as to the pattern which her threads will weave? This reflection, or something like it, was Laurent de Courtomer's next afternoon at Sessignes, where he sat on the window-seat in Aymar's pleasant room. Things had proved so much less trying than he had feared; supper last night with the two ladies, for instance (Aymar was in his bed) had been punctuated only by questions such as he could answer. The ladies naturally wished to know the details of his friend's captivity and illness, but among these he had been able to exercise selection; and he was certainly not going to undeceive them when they jumped to the conclusion that it was on account of his health that Aymar had been 'released.' Details of the affair at Pont-aux-Rochers they could hardly expect from him, nor did Mme de la Rocheterie press for them, while her granddaughter, as he knew, had already been told enough by her cousin to avoid that subject, in public, like the plague.

In the second place, he and Aymar were not going to part immediately after all. Once again the Spinner had twisted the thread. The newspaper that morning, which confirmed the account of Napoleon's abdication, and told them that the King was on French soil again, apprised them also of the fact that Vendée had made peace two days before. There was therefore not the slightest need for Laurent to return thither, and he had yielded only too willingly to Aymar's solicitations to remain a little at Sessignes. Aymar himself

had been examined that morning (considerably against his will) by the doctor whom Mme de la Rocheterie had summoned, and as a result, had been confined for the present to his room. Under a promise of secrecy he had also, to Laurent's relief, allowed the doctor to see and prescribe for the burnt arm.

He was lying at this moment on a chaise-longue, pulling the ears of the enraptured wolf-hound, whose head lay on his breast.

"When are you going to ride Hironnelle, Laurent?" he asked, looking up. "She is at your disposal any time, you know. There are rods in the hall, and fish, though they are shy, in the stream; and if you want a gun, you have only to ask Célestin. And if this one-idea'd beast will go with you, perhaps you will take him for a walk some time?"

The word seemed to be familiar to Sarrasin, for he beat his tail upon the floor so vigorously that a light knock at the door was scarcely audible. A voice was then heard saying, "May I come in, Aymar?"

Laurent jumped up. It was Mme de la Rocheterie. L'Oiseleur also made instinctively to rise.

"Do not be foolish, Aymar; stay where you are," said his grandmother in her cold, gentle tones. "And do not let me disturb you, Monsieur de Courtomer. I have brought our invalid some peaches." She had indeed a shallow basket in her hand, and a scarf thrown over her brilliant white hair, as though she had been in the garden. "Ah, that incorrigible dog is up here again!"

"You mean that I am incorrigible, Grand'mère," said Aymar good-humouredly, and he ordered Sarrasin to remove himself to a distance.

Meanwhile the Vicomtesse had accepted from Laurent a chair by the couch, and though she again besought the young man not to depart, he thereafter vanished, somewhat regretting that a gentleman could not listen at the keyhole.

Sitting there beside the chaise-longue Mme de la Rocheterie subjected its occupant to a long, quiet scrutiny. Little, however, of what she really felt or thought was to be seen on her face.

"Gellois does not give me a very good account of you, Aymar," she said at last. "But, from the look of you, I hardly expected it."

"You know that he is an alarmist, my dear grandmother,"

replied the invalid. "There is nothing the matter with me now except that I get tired rather easily."

"He says that your heart is impaired."

"Temporarily, I dare say. I suppose that is why he has condemned me to lie here in this ridiculous fashion."

"But, my dear boy, you have been very—by which I mean dangerously—ill, and you know it. It is of no use to deny it, for M. de Courtomer has admitted the fact."

"I hope that you are being very charming to M. de Courtomer," responded her grandson, shifting the ground a little. "If I have been as ill as you say, all the more credit and thanks to him that I am well now. He nursed me with a devotion for which there are no words."

"You consider, in short, that you owe your life to him?"

Aymar smiled a little. "If I cannot give him his due without making the admission which you are so anxious to wring out of me, Grand'mère, yes, I do—to him and the doctor. So be kind to him—for he is not leaving us to-day after all, I am glad to say."

"No friend of yours shall have anything to complain of from me, Aymar," responded his grandmother, "particularly one to whom you are so much indebted. He seems a well-bred young man, for all his English upbringing. The name, of course, is good. I suppose he bears *sinople, three lions argent?*"

"I suppose so," said Aymar with a smile. "The one thing which I do know for certain that he bears is—a heart, or."

A smile flickered over Mme de la Rocheterie's face also. "What a pretty speech! M. de Courtomer ought to be here. —Now I will peel you a peach, and if it does not tire you to talk, you shall tell me of this unfortunate business of Pont-aux-Rochers. We have heard the most unpleasant rumours about it here."

The young man twisted a trifle in the chair. "Rumours of . . . treachery?"

"Yes," continued the Vicomtesse, selecting a peach from the basket. "And from all the details we could gather, from the completeness of the disaster—and from the fact that you were not there in person—it seems to me probable that they are true. But I should like to know." However, it was with a very undisturbed air that she began to peel the peach.

Aymar watched her for a moment. "I understand that the idea might have arisen," he said at last. "But it is a false one. There was no treachery over the business."

His grandmother raised her eyebrows. "My dear boy, what was there, then? A miracle, worked for the Bonapartists?"

"A miscalculation—a grave error of judgment."

"Ah, I think I can guess whose!"

"Can you? I fancy not!" He gave a rather wan ironic smile. "It was my own, Grand'mère."

And at that Mme de la Rocheterie not only lifted her eyes from her occupation, but looked at him so piercingly that under her gaze the easily raised flush of convalescence ran across Aymar's own face for an instant.

"Your error in judgment, I suppose you imply, because you chose an incapable man for your subordinate," she remarked "I warn you, mon fils, that I have no patience with that kind of quixotry. Our name, your reputation, shall not be used to shield a man who is a bungler, if no worse."

The flush came again, and deeper this time, but it left Aymar very pale. "If you mean M. de Fresne, he is in no need of shielding—*shielding*, my God!" he said under his breath. "I committed the . . . the mistake myself. But if you have no objection, we will not talk about it."

"As you please," said the Vicomtesse, calmly. She had finished her task, and delicately wiped her fingers. "I have you back safe and comparatively sound, which is all I care about. The reputation of L'Oiseleur is strong enough to take care of itself. All the same, as I do not wish you to be under a misapprehension as to my intelligence, I must tell you that I do not believe you about M. de Fresne."

Her grandson gave almost a groan of irritation and anger. "You accuse me of lying, then?"

"I accuse you of having a bad memory. The evening that you were here in April—the evening before the ambuscade—you told me casually at supper that M. de Fresne, without awaiting your orders, was moving your men across the river next morning. I could see, though you did not say so, that you were a little annoyed. Late that evening you received news which made you rush off post-haste to them; the next thing we hear is that they have walked into a trap and been cut up. And then you say the blame is yours, and not your thick-headed lieutenant's! You see, my dear boy, that you cannot hoodwink me like that!"

Aymar, taken aback as he was for the moment, pulled

himself higher on the couch. His eyes were bright, his mouth determined. "I absolutely refuse to have M. de Fresne made a scapegoat any more!" he said hotly. "I, and I alone, am responsible for what happened at Pont-aux-Rochers. I will not have another man's reputation sacrificed to save mine!"

"I was not aware," said his grandmother dryly, "that M. de Fresne had any particular reputation to sacrifice. But if you are going to agitate yourself over it like this, you shall take all the blame you want. Lie down again, for Heaven's sake!" She got up and rearranged his cushions. "I begin to think that part of the reason why you look like a seven days' ghost is that you are taking this, your solitary reverse, so much au grand tragique. That comes, my dear Aymar, of being the favourite of fortune—and of being young. Well, time, unfortunately, will cure the latter——"

"And has already cured the first," finished Aymar with a queer little smile, shutting his eyes for a second. "Thank you, Bonne-maman." He opened them again and looked at her as she resumed her seat. "It is plain that you do not know how many men I lost over that affair."

"But what were your men for?" enquired the Vicomtesse. "I do not say that you exactly kept them in cotton-wool, but you have always been ridiculously sensitive about their welfare. One must break eggs to make an omelette, as the vulgar say.—Well, let us talk of something else. There is a much pleasanter subject to hand, is there not?" And her smile, though mischievous, was not unkind.

But Aymar looked away and said nothing.

"I have tired you so much that you cannot even talk about *her*?" asked his grandmother after a moment. "I shall have the young gentleman with the heart of gold taking me to task." She got up, putting the peach near him. "Another time, then; just now you can lie here and reflect how true it is that everything comes to him who waits. . . . Only my dearest boy"—she bent and kissed him tenderly—"do try to see your late reverse in its proper proportions! I should like to point out—if you will not take the consolation amiss—that now, owing to the signal victory of mid-June, it is of small consequence what happened to your little force at the end of April!"

Of small consequence! Oh, if only it were! As the door closed behind her Aymar turned and lay motionless, his face hidden in one of his cushions.

(2)

The wolf-hound Sarrasin, who, having a soul above rabbits, usually disdained the investigation of hedges, paced soberly along at Laurent's heels one fine evening, four days later, on the return from the walk they had taken together. Their respective master and friend was not yet strong enough to accompany them, for he had only made his first appearance downstairs at déjeuner that day; moreover he was closeted with Jacques Eveno, now become a kind of enquiry agent for him with regard to the victims of Pont-aux-Rochers.

It was nearly sunset, and Sessignes, as it came into sight, was bathed in a warm and flattering radiance. Already Laurent loved the place, which seemed to fit Aymar so well—old and noble and secure and unpretentious. Yet, much as he delighted in being here, and in feeling that he was of use to Aymar, both as his only real confidant, and as an accomplice in diverting awkward questions, he was torn, also, with a desire to get back to his mother. But Paris was probably invested by this time; though a friend, he was not likely to succeed in getting through the English and Prussian lines. Directly, however, that there seemed to be a chance of penetrating to the capital, he would set off to her.

On the whole, these four days, like his first supper-party at Sessignes, had been less agitating than he had feared. There was strain, of course, for Aymar, and for him, and, presumably, for Madame de Villecresne up to a point, because of what she knew; but Mme de la Rocheterie had not added to the inevitable malaise the extra tension which he had anticipated. Her attitude at present was one of half-amused toleration of Aymar's concern for his unfortunate men, and of a disregard of the possibilities of blame which was sublime in its contempt. Laurent's only hope was that sleeping dogs might be left to lie. For, used as he was to the society of old ladies, and versed in the ways that pleased them, Mme de la Rocheterie inspired in him a latent terror which his own formidable great-aunts had never roused. With her, one felt very much in the presence of an intelligence. When she set that intelligence to finding out anything, he was sure that she would succeed. He could only pray that his might not be the unwary tongue to kindle this desire.

About Mme de Villecresne he had now quite made up his

mind. More girlish than he had pictured her, the widow, the six years' nominal wife (no older indeed than himself) more beautiful even than he had thought at first, and with a nameless charm of glance and voice, he now found her bewitching. He was for ever on the watch for the fleeting, half-tantalising resemblances to Aymar himself; these, indeed, completed his subjugation. So, except that in his heart of hearts he did not think any woman good enough for his friend, he approved his choice. And, fortunately, there was no shadow of doubt that she loved Aymar deeply. He had seen her with him in the chaise . . . and looking at him to-day at déjeuner. And now, if it were not for this horrible cloud over him, of whose full proportions she was not aware, their long-delayed happiness was at hand. He did hope that Aymar would have no hesitation about taking it quickly. From something which his friend had let fall the other day he was a little afraid. . . Being cousins, they would of course have to get a dispensation first. . . .

The young man reflected on their cousinship as he swung along. Had they not been lovers they must almost, he thought, feel like brother and sister, brought up together as they had been from so tender an age. And his thoughts flew instantly to a picture in the salon of the château which had charmed and delighted him from the first—a pastel wherein a beautiful serious boy of ten or thereabouts held by the hand a younger girl-child, bright-haired like himself and smiling rather roguishly at the spectator. The little Aymar had a kite on which his other hand rested, somewhat as if on a shield, but his attention, obviously, was concentrated on his companion with an effect of care and protection not usual at the kite-flying age. It came to Laurent, as he neared Sessignes, how deeply that same attitude was still Aymar's, and how, to shelter his cousin now from the knowledge of what she, all innocently, had brought upon him, he was running what his friend could not but consider a very grave risk indeed. But it was not for him to say, "Tell her everything!" Aymar knew what he was doing.

And the whole future? The nightmare idea of arrest by his own side still sometimes visited Laurent, since the morning when Aymar had referred to it. But such a blow was unlikely to fall on him because, having raised and equipped his Eperviers entirely by his own efforts, he was under the direct orders of no commander whatever, not even of Sol de Grisolles himself. Yet, in spite of that, suppose

that one day he *were* dragged off from Sessignes to answer for what he had done. . . . That was the terrible part of it—for what he *had* done. . . .

"Oh, Sarrasin," said Laurent with a shiver, "you wise dog, if only you could help your master!" But the wolf-hound merely swayed his tail, and they came up the avenue to the château, and turned along the side of the house to the highest terrace. And here the sunset, already brightening behind the woods that flanked the pastures on the other side of the Aven, was seen in all its half-tragic splendour, like the death of a hero. It tinged the river and smote on the bright uncovered head of her who had been the little girl in the picture, as she stood by the terrace wall gazing out into the distance.

Laurent caught sight of her face; it looked so exceedingly grave that he stopped before she had, perhaps, even heard his step. But Sarrasin went up to her, so she turned, and Laurent, realising that she wished to speak to him, approached her.

"Monsieur de Courtomer," she began rather abruptly, "I want to consult you about something rather terrible—something which I hope may be kept from my cousin's knowledge."

"I am at your service, Madame," replied Laurent. This was indeed turning the tables in the matter of concealment.

Mme de Villecresne moved a trifle away, and, looking down, fingered the warm lichened stone of the terrace wall for a moment. The little curls at the back of her neck glowed like burnished gold. "It is about Pont-aux-Rochers. My cousin warned me himself that I might hear it said that the supposed treachery there was—his own. I had not heard it, and till this afternoon I could have sworn that it was impossible so atrocious a slander should even be breathed in Brittany of L'Oiseleur! Yet this very afternoon I have just heard worse—if it were possible—and I do not know what to do about it."

Her breath seemed to fail her for an instant. Laurent looked at her in mute uneasiness.

"I pray that Aymar himself does not know. . . . I hardly like even to repeat it, but my maid tells me that she heard a man in the village saying he had heard a report that it was Aymar's own men who shot him, on account of the disaster at the bridge. If only he has not heard it himself—if only we can keep it from him!"

She raised her eyes at the last words. But what she

saw on the candid visage of her cousin's confidant caused her to put a hand quickly to her heart.

"Merciful Heavens—it is not *true!*"

Laurent lowered his head. Mme de Villecresne gripped his arm, breathlessly repeating, "It is not true!—it cannot be!"

"Unfortunately . . . it is true," responded the young man, more than unwillingly.

His fair head and the sunset all reeled together, obviously, before the girl's eyes. She loosed his arm and sank down on the broad wall beside him, her face drained of colour; then, as Laurent, alarmed, took a step towards her, she made a gesture as if to ward him off, and covered it with her hands.

"It was only two or three of them," added Laurent hesitatingly.

She made no answer, and after another terrible silence, during which her informant rooted up an entire pink from between the stones of the wall, she rose, her face still hidden, and went from him.

Aymar, sitting at a table in his room with a pen between his fingers and fatigue on his face, heard from Laurent the account of what had just happened without comment or change of expression.

"Where is she now?" he asked, getting up.

"I do not know. Oh, Aymar, I cannot blame myself enough!"

"There is no need to blame yourself at all. It will be all over the place in a day or two. I have just had a terrible scene with Eveno. He had heard it in the village too; and he was nearly demented. He wanted to go off and do murder."

"He will not, I hope?" exclaimed Laurent, startled.

"Not now. Besides, he does not know, since I would not tell him, whom to murder. Ninety men is rather a large order, single-handed." He gave a weary little laugh, and went to the door. "Really I do not know which is more difficult to handle, the rebel or the fanatically faithful!"

For his friend's sake at least Laurent could not but be glad when he learnt later that he had not succeeded in getting speech with his cousin. She had gone to her room, whence she did not appear again that evening. She had a bad headache, it seemed. But the Vicomtesse was in great spirits

at supper, and entertained Laurent with some witty but rather doubtful stories. "I wonder if she knows what heartache is," thought the young man . . . and then remembered her guillotined sons.

(3)

"I think that Mme la Comtesse has gone to the orchard for some flowers," said old Célestin next morning in answer to his young master's enquiry. And he added, looking at him affectionately, "It is good to see you about again, Monsieur Aymar!"

So, wishing that she were anywhere but in the apple-orchard, Aymar went towards it in the haze of heat which brooded over everything, and opened the gate, for he could not vault gates nowadays. And when he was among the trees he saw why Avoye should have come here for flowers, for where the grass had been left long it was starred with moon-daisies. Yet for a moment, with relief, he thought that she was not in the orchard at all. Then he saw her, an empty basket beside her, crouched at the foot of an apple tree, her head against the trunk, in the most forlorn attitude imaginable.

He quickened his steps. "Avoye, what is the matter? Are you ill, my dear? Can I——"

On that he saw that she was crying as if her heart would break. He went down on one knee beside her. "Avoye, my darling . . ."

She turned to him instantly, and clung to him like a child. "It is . . . what M. de Courtomer told me yesterday. . . . I cried nearly all night . . . now again . . . Aymar, Aymar, I can't bear it for you!"

Holding her to him, he soothed her as one soothes a child; and indeed she seemed very small. "My little heart, it is not worth crying over. It all happened in a hurry—the Blues were on us. It was really one man's doing only, and he had a grudge against me. My darling, you never expected me always to come off scot-free?"

A long sob, shaking her there against his breast, seemed to say that *that* was very different. He held her closer. And, gradually comforted by his presence, she grew calmer, and finally ceased to sob.

And here he was, holding her in his arms again, he who had come out into the orchard to tell her why he could not

marry her yet. And that had got to be done. This beginning had not made it easier to do. He would not have the fortitude to tell her at all while she clung to him. So, somehow, he got her to her feet, and then to a seat under one of the old apple trees, and, instead of sitting down too, stood before her.

"Avoye, I came out here to tell you the story I promised you in the cottage—the story of how and why this happened to me. It is time that you knew."

"Since I know the end," she said pitifully, "need I know the beginning?"

Aymar hesitated. "If the . . . the end, then, will stand to you for sufficient reason why, as an honourable man, I cannot ask you to marry me at present, perhaps not. Will it, Avoye?"

She twisted her damp handkerchief into a ball. "Why should I not marry you, Aymar, because you have been nearly murdered for someone else's fault?"

So he was not to escape the ordeal of lying to her. For if the tale was told at all, it should be told in his way. On that point he never wavered. What, let her, heartbroken as she was already, let her know that she herself was the cause of what he had suffered? He drew a long breath.

"Very well," he said quietly. "I shall have to tell you whose the fault was, and then you will see things differently." He came and sat down beside her, under the tree, but not very near. "I will begin at the beginning."

To anyone who knew how the story was going to end it would have been passably painful hearing, but when the hearer was a woman and the narrator was the man she loved it was nearly intolerable. Making the narrative as brief as possible, Aymar got without interruption or pause as far as his finding de Fresne's letter at Sessignes, and his thought of how he could still send it and bring off the move he had discussed at Keraven. All reference to Vaubernier and his tidings he naturally omitted, and merely said, "So, in order to lure the Imperialists to Pont-aux-Rochers, as we had talked of doing, I sent them de Fresne's letter. I will not tell you how I sent it, nor by whom, nor how I made it plausible. . . . Yes, there was some risk, I grant you, but not much—or so I saw it then, fresh from my interview with Saint-Etienne. How deep my repentance was afterwards—but that you can guess."

Avoye's gaze was on him, smitten, horrified.

"You actually sent it—you yourself! It *was* really your doing—Pont-aux-Rochers!"

"Yes," he returned, meeting the gaze. "But it was not treachery."

"Aymar, Aymar, as if I needed that saying to me! But it was hazardous beyond words, surely, and . . . and strange!"

Yes, he could see that there was something repugnant to her, even as there had been to him, in the act—not in the risk, but in the act itself.

"It was a *ruse de guerre*, Avoye—defensible, I think, from that standpoint. One cannot, unfortunately, be too particular sometimes as to the means one uses. And I, too, did not overmuch relish doing it."

"I see that it was a *ruse*. And no one, of course, would have blamed you for it if your real intention had been obvious. But, as it did not succeed, your men thought that you had sent information of their movements to the enemy *meaning* to betray them! . . . Oh, Aymar, I see it all—how terrible, how unspeakably terrible! . . . But go on, my darling; what happened next? Some dreadful misfortune, I know it!"

He went on, his hand shading his face lest it should betray him. But the agony point of the narrative was past; he hoped he need lie no more. Avoye did not interrupt again; indeed, when she heard of Keraven reached at dawn and empty, she put her hands over her face. Aymar mentioned his interview with de Fresne and his having given up his sword, laid as much stress as possible on Magloire's insubordination, let her see that, in a sense, he had had to sacrifice himself to save his lieutenant, and left, he hoped, in her mind a picture of a surprise, a scuffle, a chance shot or two . . . just enough, unfortunately, to give colour to the statement that the Eperviers had shot their own commander for treachery.

After that he leant back against the trunk of the tree in silence. It had been as much as he could do to get through. The tit which for some moments had been busy, perhaps eavesdropping, in the apple-boughs above them, dislodged a tiny twig, which fell on to his knee. He took it up and fingered it absently. After all, he had not had to lie much. He had but told her a half-truth.

"I wish," said Avoye, breaking the silence at last, her eyes full of tears, "I wish you had never met M. de Saint-Etienne! It was his fault that all this happened to you,

Aimé; it was he, or his friend, who gave you this fatal idea. . . . I am sure it could not have been a plan of yours, to send information in that way, without any real necessity—not because you were in a difficult situation and had to extricate yourself, but just for the chance of snaring the Blues. If you *had* been in difficulties——”

Aymar threw away the little twig and roused himself. This was a dangerous line of thought. But he could think of nothing better with which to check it than, “I have regretted it enough since, my dear.”

Avoye shivered a little. Then she put a hand on his. “But surely the Imperialists, who looked after you so well, did not think—that thing of you? They must have understood?”

“When my own men did not? No, Avoye, they did not . . . understand.”

She caught her hands together and the tears brimmed over.

“Oh, why did you not make a better story—save your name somehow when you sent the letter? Why did you send it at all?”

And as he did not answer, but sat with downbent head she went on, “But I do not mean to criticise, to scold! It sounds so cruel, when you have suffered so!”

Aymar lifted his eyes, and smiled at her out of his pain and fatigue. “No, little heart, I know you did not mean to do that.” He put his hand over hers and they relapsed into momentary silence.

“Aymar,” said his cousin suddenly, “to whom did you say you sent the letter?”

His hand loosed itself a little. “I did not mention any name, I think,” he answered warily. “Why?”

“Because I wondered for a second whether it could have been to the Imperialists who stopped me at the *Cheval Blanc*—under a Colonel Richard, I think the name was—for you remember, perhaps, that that was the very night I was detained. And it would have been a horrible coincidence, for I heard those men marching out early next morning. But of course, if it was not to him——”

There was no help for it if she questioned him. He withdrew his hand first. “No,” he answered, sick at heart and quite composed, “I sent it to the commandant at Arzon.”

There was a sigh of relief beside him. “I am so glad,”

said Avoye. "And I am so glad, too, that you did not know at the time that I was a sort of prisoner, because it would have distressed you unnecessarily. . . . You did not know, did you?" she asked, in a slightly different voice.

He shook his head. Hell must be like this. "I learnt of it first when I got your letter. Yes, I am glad I . . . did not know.—As for that letter," he went on after a second or two, "I hope you understood, my darling, why, as a prisoner, I could not answer it as I should have done had I been free . . . and why, now, I must not ask you yet to take our name again."

"I see why you think you must not," she said gently. "But, Aymar, with a reputation like yours, you have only to tell the story as you have told it to me to clear yourself! Other Royalists might perhaps criticise you for taking too much risk, but as for thinking that you deliberately betrayed your own men——"

"No, Avoye," he broke in quickly, "other Royalists do think that—at least some of them." And as she stared at him incredulously, he told her the story of M. de Lanascot, and of the acquaintance who had walked out of the inn at his entry.

"But, Aymar," she said indignantly, "they must be mad! You, with your past—you, L'Oiseleur!"

"Darling, you must face it; I have a different past now—a present, rather. You see, the very fact of what happened to me in the Bois des Fauvettes condemns me unheard. Royalists, even one's own acquaintances, are saying—unwillingly, in many cases, perhaps, and shocked as much as you like—"It must be true, because his own men shot him for it."

A quiver ran through her. "Then it rests with you—and with M. de Saint-Étienne—to show that it is not true!" And, looking at him with all her heart in her eyes, she put her hand in his. "If only we had the dispensation I would marry you to-morrow . . . to show how little I care for such evil tongues."

He bent his head over the hand. "You must leave me some pride, Avoye."

"No one will ever succeed in robbing you entirely of that, my dear. . . . But I have not left myself much, have I, to say such a thing?"

Somehow she was in his arms again. He kissed her hair, and they both were silent.

"Aymar, am I hurting you?" she asked suddenly. "Was it—this shoulder?"

"Hurting me!" he answered in a low voice. "You weigh about as much as a wren! And if it were not healed it would be from this moment. Don't move! . . . You can't!" he added with a little inflection of triumph.

Yet the next moment he had loosed her himself, and stood up. "I beg your pardon, Avoye. I have not . . . I must wait."

She saw that he meant it; she knew why he felt as he did. Unnecessary as she might think his scruples, she was not going to hurt his pride more than it had already been hurt by making self-control more difficult for him. She too got up, and gave him her hand. He was her lover, but he was almost her brother too. "You shall do what you think best, Aymar. I can wait also."

He kissed her hand, and going with her to the orchard gate, opened it for her without a word. And after he had watched her go he went and leant against a tree, with his arms folded, in the very place and almost in the same posture as he had waited her coming with such dizzy rapture three months before, when she had not come, but instead of her—disgrace. And Aymar faced that reflection now, standing motionless as, nine weeks ago to this very day, he had stood against another tree. . . . What had been blossom above him here on that magic and hateful April night was fruit now, green and immature; but in his ruined life the fruit of what he had done had ripened much more quickly. He had said that he could not ask Avoye to marry him yet—but when could he? How was he ever going to wash away the stain?

He leant there long after she had gone, his eyes fixed on the blue line of woods beyond the sloping pasture, his thoughts entangled, like his whole existence now, in this dark forest, where his own act had plunged him—leant there till the peacock's ugly note came, as once before, to rouse him, and he stood up, though this was morning and July, with a little start and shiver, and went from the apple-orchard which at last had seen the meeting of lovers.

(4)

Three more hot summer days slid past much as their seven predecessors had done. But Avoye de Villecresne's face had

become shadowed in their passage. And as, on the third afternoon, Aymar, followed by Sarrasin, came over the sloping meadows towards the river, more than the now customary sadness looked from his eyes. Yet, when he caught sight of a fisherman sitting very much at his ease on the other bank, his face lightened.

"Don't jump in this time!" called out Laurent. "Though indeed it is pleasanter weather for a bathe than it was that day."

Aymar crossed by the little bridge. "One doesn't bathe, if one can avoid it, in the presence of Sarrasin," he said, as he came up to him. "He has a most unfortunate conviction that it is his duty to rescue you. My first experience of his zeal was exceedingly painful."

Sarrasin, aware that he was being talked about, sat down, panting vehemently, and self-consciously offered Laurent a paw.

"I wonder what would have happened if he had been with you beside the Dart," murmured Laurent. "Thank you, Sarrasin, once is sufficient honour! If you pant like that you will frighten the fish—not that there are any this afternoon, and no one but a fool would have brought a rod down."

Aymar threw himself at full length on the bank, and, pushing the big dog into a recumbent position, pillowed his head upon him, much to Sarrasin's gratification, and there was silence.

"Has Eveno gone?" asked Laurent presently.

"Yes. I shall soon be strong enough to ride and interview people myself. But I see already . . ." He stopped for a second or two. "Laurent, I am afraid that some day I may have to sell Sessignes."

"What!"

"I can see no other way to get the money I require for pensions and the rest. I can no doubt raise it by loan or mortgage on the place, and I should not dream of selling the estate while my grandmother lived, but as I am at a loss to know how I should repay the borrowed money otherwise——"

Laurent looked across the river at the fair domain, at the towers for which he himself had developed such a feeling. "Aymar, that would be a terrible thing to do!"

"Yes, it would," agreed the Vicomte de la Rocheterie in a hard, unnatural voice. "Seven hundred years has it

sheltered us. But then the thing I have already done, unfortunately, is terrible."

There was another silence. Sarrasin snapped his great jaws at a fly. Laurent, thunderstruck, began to turn over with fresh hope a resolve which these last few days had been taking shape in his mind.

"May I say something?" he enquired at last in a somewhat stifled voice.

"You know that you can say anything you like," responded Aymar without moving.

"Even something that *you* will not like?"

"Even that!"

Laurent fixed his eyes on a point across the river.

"Have you ever thought of digging for treasure in the old part of Sessignes?" he asked.

He was aware that Aymar smiled. "My dear Laurent!"

"If you did," went on Laurent unperturbed, "you might find a hoard which you could devote to those families. . . . You might! Or I might find one for you!"

"I only wish you could!"

Laurent plucked at the grass. "You would not be very particular as to its date, in that case, would you, Aymar? I mean, you would not require it to be a very ancient treasure?"

"What do you mean?" demanded his friend. "You cannot have been so foolish—forgive me!—as really to have started explorations with that object?"

"No," said Laurent. "I have not, but if I did, I know I should find something. And, as I said, it would not matter for this purpose that it would be modern money, and that I . . . that I should have put it there myself." And as Aymar lifted himself on to his elbow and stared at him, he rushed at the fence. "I have never told you, Aymar, but the fact is that I have become rather absurdly rich since I first met you. Just before I went to Vendée my English grandfather died, and left me nearly all his money—about six thousand pounds a year—and besides that I——"

Aymar had sat up, suddenly paling. "Please don't say any more, Laurent. I am very sorry I ever mentioned the matter to you."

Laurent plucked more desperately than ever at the grass, but he stuck to his guns. "You must forgive me, but you gave me leave to say anything I liked."

"Well?" said Aymar, not encouragingly.

"You know that I should never presume to offer you money——"

"Then what are you doing now?"

Try as he would Laurent could not help wincing at the tone. He looked at the dancing water in silence for a moment.

"It is not for your own benefit, the money, Aymar! Am I to stand by and see you ruin yourself—see you break your heart—when I could so easily prevent it? Why, it would be less than one year's income of this fortune which I do not want and have not yet touched! And after all you have said—because I cannot forget your words, even though I never deserved them—after all that, I am so little to you that you will not let me do you this paltry service! It's"—he laughed with nervousness and anxiety—"on my soul, it's Arbelles over again!"

"You don't know what an impossible thing you are asking," replied Aymar, his head turned away.

"You have done more impossible," pleaded Laurent. "You went and asked a favour of your enemy . . . for the sake of another. Yet you will not take a gift from a friend—though that too is for the sake of others."

There was a long pause. Sarrasin had a fresh access of snapping, and in the Aven a fish actually jumped.

"Perhaps I might . . . take it as a loan," said Aymar at length with, it was clear, the utmost difficulty.

"And sell Sessignes to repay it!—Oh, Aymar, it's not for yourself! I . . . I think it's for me!"

Another silence. Aymar's head was still turned away; he was digging one hand into the grass farther than Laurent had ever done. Did it mean that he was going to accept? Oh, if only it might be!

And then Laurent became aware of someone approaching the stream.

"Here is your cousin!" he exclaimed in surprise. Aymar looked up, and they both scrambled to their feet.

"Eulalie de Morsan has just arrived, Aymar," Laurent heard Avoye say, as Aymar went over the bridge towards her. "She is going to stay the night. I came to tell you; Grand'mère is asking for you."

On this news Aymar made no comment; he merely thanked its bearer for her trouble. And as Laurent, inwardly cursing the moment chosen by Mme de Morsan for her arrival, went up to the house with the cousins, he learnt that

the lady was on her way home from Aix-les-Bains or somewhere, and had elected to pay them a visit *en passant*. His annoyance was, however, a little dispelled on hearing that she had brought with her the news that Paris had capitulated to the Allies three days ago.

(5)

Mme de Morsan's start of surprise when she saw Aymar, her shocked 'Mon cousin, how ill you look!' which pleased the 'cousin' in question not at all, her raising of the eyebrows and her surveying of Avoye de Villecresne, presumably because she had the temerity not to be wearing mourning, were the first impressions which Laurent gathered at this his second encounter with the fair traveller, who was graciously pleased, for her part, to assert a vivid remembrance of their first meeting, and of their conversation. Later, at supper, she was pretty well occupied in answering Mme de la Rocheterie's questions about her own doings during the twelve months or so which had passed since the Vicomtesse and her nephew's widow had met. Laurent could easily see that Mme de la Rocheterie had a penchant for this lively, free-spoken, handsome kinswoman, but that Mme de Villecresne did not share it. Compared with that opulent beauty in her elegant 'half-dress' of rose-coloured sarcenet embroidered with shaded chenille, she looked like an evening primrose by a tiger-lily. As for Aymar, he was courteous and attentive, but no more; indeed, he was somewhat silent in the salon afterwards, and so was Avoye.

But Mme de Morsan was talkative enough, and soon began to direct most of her conversation at the other guest, an attention with which he could well have dispensed, for the company was not numerous enough to make it private, and it developed uncomfortable elements. So he had been able to repay that romantic leap into the river! And had the hero been a good patient? She could fancy him being just a little exacting, but since they were such friends Laurent would hardly betray him. And was it true that it was because he had been so ill that the Imperialists had released him? Yes, said Laurent brazenly; and Mme de la Rocheterie here intimated her conviction that their commander, for all his politics, must have had a kind heart. On this the visitor introduced into the conversation a topic equally thorny and unforeseen, for she declared that she could not imagine how this Guitton

(Aymar had been obliged to supply her with the detested name) whatever his humanity, could ever have allowed such a capture as L'Oiseleur to leave his hands without giving his parole. Or had he given it? And when Laurent evasively replied that it would have been ridiculous to insist upon parole with a man in M. de la Rocheterie's then state of health, Mme de Morsan, looking pensively at her sandal, opined that it was hardly a compliment to be released unconditionally. When she further added, even though with a smile at Aymar and the air of uttering a pleasantry, that it was obvious the Imperialists must have had some reason for wanting to get rid of him, a cold and curious suspicion was already worming its way into Laurent's mind that behind this rather sub-acid banter there was knowledge of some kind. Yet it was half dispelled by the way in which she then said, laughing outright, "I will again hazard the guess that he was a trying patient!"

"Well," put in Mme de la Rocheterie with the tiniest shade of impatience, perhaps even of displeasure, "we shall never find that out from M. de Courtomer, so we can abandon the subject. Tell us, Eulalie, more of the news about Paris."

But it appeared that their visitor knew no more than the bare fact of the capitulation. As she remarked, she did not come from the neighbourhood of the capital, quite the reverse.

"I think you said you had been at Aix, did you not?" asked Avoye, speaking for almost the first time since supper. "Did you chance to meet M. de Vaubernier there?"

Aymar's and Laurent's looks met for a second. "The Marquis de Vaubernier," repeated Mme de Morsan, in evident surprise. "Has he been at Aix? No, I did not meet him there. When did he go, and why?"

It was the Vicomtesse who supplied this information, adding that, if he had returned home, she would have invited the old gentleman over that evening; he was so fond of a game of whist. And she thereupon suggested that the four young people should play a rubber. Two of these—probably three—were profoundly grateful for the suggestion, and they played cards in peace till bedtime, Laurent only suffering one spasm of probably needless apprehension and dismay when he thought he discerned Mme de Morsan looking very fixedly at Aymar's wrists as he dealt. But *he* could see nothing there now.

By tacit consent he went with Aymar into his room when they were upstairs.

"Do you think that Mme de Morsan can possibly know anything?" was his first question.

"I am sure she does. What it is, exactly, I must find out to-morrow."

"Yet, surely," observed Laurent, looking bothered, "she could not have said those things to you . . . about you . . . intentionally, of set purpose!" (For how could a woman enjoy seeing the man of whom she was enamoured writhe—not that Aymar had writhed . . . outwardly.)

"Why not?"

"Well, because you—because she—because it would be unkind," responded Laurent, rather red.

"All the stronger incentive," observed Aymar dryly. "I shall have it out with her to-morrow."

So Laurent left that subject and embarked, half regretfully, on the next. Paris having capitulated, he felt that he must go to his mother at once, premising, however, that the day after to-morrow would be early enough to start. If Aymar had no objection, he should like to outstay Mme de Morsan.

Aymar smiled at that. Laurent took up his candle again, went a few paces towards the door, and stopped. "I wish I could know to-night, Aymar," he said wistfully, "if you are going to agree to what I proposed this afternoon? It would be the best parting gift you could give me—the thing I want most in the world just now . . . except that you should be cleared."

For a very long minute Aymar stood looking down at the floor.

At last he raised his head. "I wish," he said, drawing a long breath, "that it were not so hard to give in to what is . . . happiness to me also." And he gave Laurent the most wonderful smile he had ever seen.

(6)

It was partly with the idea of leaving the field free for Aymar to have his explanation with Mme de Morsan that Laurent took himself off for a walk next morning, starting from the water-meadows below the château. He walked for a good hour and a half, steering himself by the towers of Sessignes on the rise, and accompanied all the time by the intense and quiet joy which had dwelt with him since last

night—since Aymar had given him that overwhelming proof of his affection. For that acceptance of his was a greater happiness to Laurent than even the happiness of having something to offer him. . . .

Absorbed in this content, he was returning through the pastures, by the side of a hedge which divided one of the big fields from the next, when he was brought back to his surroundings by voices on the other side of it, a little ahead of him. He had advanced a few steps more before he realised that one was undoubtedly Aymar's. The other was a woman's—Mme de Morsan's?

If so, his manœuvre had not been very successful. However, he need not interrupt the interview, for the hedge was too tall and too thick for them to see him, and if he passed swiftly and quietly they would probably not hear him either. Eavesdropping was naturally the last thought in his mind, since for one thing he knew the purpose of the meeting, and would certainly hear its result later from Aymar. He quickened his pace to get past, the grass muffling his footfall, when through the hedge there burst these startling words:

"Aymar, you cannot be as cold as you seem! Kiss me—kiss me only once, and you will know that you are not!"

The voice *was* Mme de Morsan's. And Aymar's quick "Eulalie, you are mad. Has the sun——" was swallowed up in the vehemence of her passion.

"The sun! It is you, with your pallor and your unapproachableness and your wounded honour! And you would be safe with me as you never will be with *her*! I do not care what you did! Aymar, Aymar! . . ."

Laurent heard no more. He had fled stealthily back on his tracks. Good Heavens! Poor Aymar! It was certain that the whole of this interview would never be related to him now!

He made a wide detour, but when he approached the river some half-hour later he pulled up again. A lady was leaning over the rail of the little bridge which he must traverse, staring into the water and swinging to and fro a tiny pink sunshade. It was Mme de Morsan. Well, it was unlikely that she would want to kiss *him*! Raising his hat, he courageously passed her, noticing that she was more than usually pale . . . whereas he thought that she ought to have been red. She gave him, however, a rather absent but quite unembarrassed smile.

It was Laurent himself who was embarrassed when, after

search, he came on Aymar before déjeuner, in the hall. He had only just come in, and he had evidently been walking furiously, and was angry with something of the consuming anger of that penultimate day at Arbelles.

"Yes, she knows everything," he said curtly, as he went past Laurent to the stairs, "—everything but the cause, that is. But she will not tell what she knows."

"I wonder how you are sure of that?" thought Laurent, looking after his ascending figure—wondering also, despite himself, how that one-sided love-scene had ended.

Déjeuner then followed, not favoured by the presence of Mme de la Rocheterie, who, being slightly indisposed, was keeping her room. It might have gone better had she been there, though to be sure there was nothing wrong with Mme de Morsan's self-possession. Aymar, who never addressed her, was steely, and, when the meal was over, became invisible. There seemed, however, no reason why Laurent should not go for a last ride on Hirondelle, and so, after bidding farewell to Mme de Morsan, who was leaving Sessignes at two o'clock, he departed.

(7)

It fell, therefore, to Avoye de Villecresne to entertain the guest for the last half-hour of her stay, after the latter had duly made her farewells to Mme de la Rocheterie upstairs. It was to be presumed that, whatever had taken place between them that morning (for Avoye could not be blind to his attitude at déjeuner) the master of the house would reappear in time to hand the departing visitor to her carriage. In the meantime Mme de Morsan sat ready in the salon, arrayed in a Russian mantle of pale salmon-coloured cloth ornamented with a border of maroon velvet and white silk cord.

"He is indeed a *fidus Achates*, that young man," she observed of Laurent de Courtomer when the latter had taken his leave. "Pylades, Patroclus and Euryalus all rolled into one. (Did you know I had so much classical lore? I must have imbibed it from poor Edouard.) But I think I could better describe M. de Courtomer as Sarrasin on two legs. I have seen him looking at Aymar with very much the same expression."

"We owe him more than we can ever repay," said Avoye.

She hated discussing anybody she liked with Eulalie de Morsan.

"Yes, indeed you do," agreed that lady. "Nevertheless, it is dreadful to see our poor Aymar so changed."

Worst of all was it to discuss Aymar with her. "He is getting stronger," replied Avoye briefly.

"But, mon Dieu, what he must have suffered . . . in his pride!"

Avoye winced. "Yes, Pont-aux-Rochers was a terrible blow."

"Oh, I was referring to the Bois des Fauvettes," said Mme de Morsan lazily.

"You mean his capture? Naturally he felt that, at such a time." Avoye got up, went quickly to her work-table, and opened a drawer. "What do you think of this new kind of embroidery, Eulalie? I have been wanting your opinion on it."

Mme de Morsan took the specimen brought to her, but she did not look at it. She looked up at the girl instead. "Something happened to him before his capture, did it not? . . . I see that you do not want to discuss it. Neither do I. But I must admit that I find it very interesting, the profound resemblance that there is at bottom between all men, however exceptional they seem to be. It is really something of a relief to know that our dear Aymar is human after all—as human as any other man."

"I have no idea what you mean," returned Avoye frigidly, intensely disliking words and tone and smile.

The smile grew. "No? And yet it is wonderful to think that to-day, just as in the Middle Ages . . . You remember the legend of the original Oiseleur, and how he lost the *jartier* through a woman?"

"Yes."

"Well, history is only a series of repetitions. Forgive the truism!"

"As I say, I do not know what you are talking about," repeated Avoye, but more warmly this time.

"Has not Aymar lost the *jartier*? Well, if he did not exactly present that to a lady, he presented her with something more valuable—his good name."

Avoye lifted her proud little head. "Are you trying to inform me, Eulalie, that report has introduced a woman into this story?"

"No, ma chère. Report has left her out—fortunately

for our cousin. But she was there all the same. I happen to know the true version, and I am willing to share it with you."

"I am not quite sure," said Avoys, considering her, "that you always know what truth is, Eulalie."

"You are frank—quite like Tante Athénaïs for once—*merci!* But I do know; it is others, you will find, who have tampered with it. Ah, my dear Avoys, with your little white *ingénue's* mind . . . if you knew!"

"Please drop these hints, Eulalie, and tell me straight out what you mean!"

"With pleasure," replied Mme de Morsan, arranging her mantle. "Ask Aymar, then, whether he did not really send his famous letter to the enemy as the price of a woman's life!"

"Absurd!" exclaimed Mme de Villecresne, now thoroughly roused. "I wonder you have not more sense!"

Eulalie smiled sweetly. "Oh, I know why you are angry. You think that there is only one woman in the world for whom Aymar would do such a thing."

"Aymar would not do a thing like that for any woman!"

"Again the *ingénue!* Ask him!"

"Indeed I shall not!" cried Avoys contemptuously.

"No, perhaps you are wiser. . . . When are you going to marry him?—Ah, forgive my indiscretion! Yet, on the whole, I think I should get his confession out of him first, if I were you."

"Confession! Aymar!"

"Yes, even Aymar! . . . Have I not said that he has proved himself human after all? Listen; the Bonapartists had in their hands at the end of April a woman whom they were, apparently, going to shoot as a spy, because they suspected her of carrying information . . . as she *had* done, before the Restoration. To save her, Aymar made a bargain, took the fearful risk he did . . . and lost."

"Eulalie, you are dreaming!"

"It is you who are asleep, *ma chère*. I am trying to wake you, since you will have to come out of the trance some day. . . . Of course you think I am libelling L'Oiseleur. Well, you have only to ask him—though to be sure he may have become so much further human as to lie. . . . I suppose we shall see him before I go?" She looked at the clock. "I have not yet made him my *adieux*."

"It is . . . a libel!" said Avoys, her breath coming short. "For no woman——"

Mme de Morsan leant forward. "For one woman, perhaps, Avoye . . . for one! Ought you not to be proud? Such a hecatomb . . . and his good name! You see it, do you not, for surely you remember in whose hands you were on the night of April the twenty-seventh?"

"But I . . ." faltered Avoye, staring at her, "I was in no danger . . . there was no talk of shooting . . ."

"Is that so? I can well believe it. But M. de Vaubernier, who brought the news to Aymar here, and acted as his intermediary, was crazed with fear for you."

Avoye had sprung to her feet. "Oh, it's impossible! It's . . . you are lying wickedly! . . . I *know* that you are lying, for Aymar himself has told me all about the letter, and why he sent it—it was a plan he had already made. And it was not sent to where I was at all! He would have known that I would rather a thousand times . . . but no, it is too absurd to pretend that I was in danger of being shot when I was treated with such courtesy . . . and more than absurd, wicked," she added, as a fresh aspect dawned upon her, "to make out that I—I—was the cause of Pont-aux-Rochers!"

Eulalie shrugged her shoulders in the salmon-coloured mantle. "Well, I think I hear Aymar's step, so you can easily have me proved a liar . . . or rather, perhaps, learn that the Marquis de Vaubernier, from whom I had the story, is a romancer of the first order."

It *was* Aymar's step. In a moment more he came in through the long window.

"Your carriage is at the door, Madame," he said coldly to Eulalie. "May I have the honour of conducting you to it?"

But Mme de Morsan was looking down, smiling and silent, contemplating her toe on the edge of the hearth. Avoye's eyes were fixed on her cousin; then she suddenly sat down as if her limbs would no longer sustain her. But it was she who broke the silence.

"Eulalie has been telling me something about you . . . which I do not believe."

"Something," completed Mme de Morsan in measured tones, "which I elicited from M. de Vaubernier—no, not at Aix. As I told you, I did not see him there. It was at Chambéry. You must not blame the old gentleman; in his horror at what had happened to you, Aymar, which he knew, and told me, he let out *why* it had happened. And now I have incautiously mentioned it to Avoye, since she is so

deeply concerned in it, and find that you had decided—wisely, I dare say—to keep her in the dark. Need I say how much I regret——”

“No!” broke in Aymar, standing before her very tall and straight. “No, you need not add a lie to what you have done! Your carriage, as I said, is at the door,” and he made a gesture towards the hall. His eyes were blazing.

Eulalie de Morsan looked up at him easily, admiringly. “What I have done, my dear Aymar—how well you look in a rage!—is merely to tell the truth . . . of which you have been sparing!”

“But it is not the truth!” repeated Avoye, in the voice of one who, having been mortally stabbed, denies the wound.

Mme de Morsan rose in an unconcerned manner, and gathered together her possessions. “Well, as Aymar does not seem anxious to have a witness of his answer to that statement, I will leave you together. Au revoir, ma chère.”

Avoye took no notice. Aymar was already at the door, holding it open. Eulalie went slowly past him, and, looking him in the face as she did so, said, very low, “You would have done better to strike the bargain. And now you will see the quality of *her* love!” Yet suddenly her own face was convulsed, and she turned it aside.

He did not vouchsafe a word or a look, but, standing on the threshold, said to Célestin who, with her maid, was waiting in the hall, “Hand Mme de Morsan to her carriage,” and went into the salon again, shutting the door behind him.

(8)

Avoye was standing before the great hearth, her back to him, her face buried in her hands. He stood a moment at the door, looking at her, then he crossed the room towards her. At his step she dropped her hands, and, clasping them hard in front of her, without turning towards him, without even glancing at him, said in an almost inaudible voice:

“Aymar, say that it is not true!”

No, to pile more lies on those the orchard had drawn from him—he could not do it. He had come to that hour which he had sacrificed so much to avert, when he must tell her of her innocent share in his ruin. He set his teeth for a moment as he took out the knife. If only it were destined for his breast and not hers!

“Will you tell me exactly what she said to you?”

Still not looking at him, very briefly, as one half-stunned, she told him. The brutal manner in which she had herself been enlightened was clear enough. But Aymar had hardly a thought to spare for Eulalie, her perfidy, her bitter revenge. What mattered was this stricken, pitifully bewildered little Avoye, so pale in her grey gown, who would not look at him while she waited for the denial which he could not give, but only repeated again and again, in a voice that made his heart ache, "Aymar, say it is not true, say it is not true!" and then, "How can it be true? How could you have done it to save me? you did not know that I had been stopped—you said so!"

"I wanted to spare you all I could," he answered very sadly.

"To spare me? Why, what had I done?"

"Nothing—nothing! That was why."

"But I was in no danger—you did not even know that I was detained. And she says that Godfather was mixed up in it—yet you never said a word of it!" And now she was looking at him indeed. "Is it possible that down there in the orchard, when my heart was breaking about you, you took me in your arms and comforted me . . . with *lies*!"

The hated word stung him a little in the midst of everything else.

"How could I tell you the truth, my darling, when, as you say, your heart was breaking like that? And, although I sent the letter to save you it *was* part of a ruse—a plan I had made beforehand. Can't you believe me, Avoye?"

"But it is all so crazy!" she exclaimed. "I in danger of being shot—I to whom they apologised! . . . And Godfather, what was he doing in it? He never came there! And you really thought, *you*——"

Poor child, poor lamb, so bewildered under the touch of the knife. Oh, to get through this barbarity quickly! "Dearest, I will tell you exactly what happened. But sit down, for pity's sake." He seized and swung forward a little gilt chair. "If only I had never given that woman the chance of springing it on you like this—if only I had guessed that she knew!"

But she recoiled from him. She would have none of the chair. She went back as far as the carved stone of the hearth and put a hand to that. And then she faced him. "Be quick, Aymar, be quick! I'm . . . frightened!"

So, standing in front of her, and in front of the proud,

indifferent swans of their blazon, he told her shortly the other, the true, complete story. But it had a strange sound in his own ears now.

There was fear indeed in her eyes when he had finished. And when he said, "Do you see, my dear, a little, why I wanted you never to know?" and tried to take her hand, she drew it away and shook her head.

"How *can* they both be true—that you did it for a military reason, which you told me first, and that you did it to save me because you imagined—*imagined*—that I was in danger?"

Aymar looked down at her, full of a great pity. "Do you not see," he said again, "the plan was there, ready, and I used it, that was all."

Trembling visibly, and twisting her hands a little, she said, "No; I cannot. I cannot help feeling, which story am I to believe . . . or perhaps you have another?"

"*Avoye!*" he exclaimed, flushing scarlet.

"I wish you had! I wish you had! How am I to believe, first, that you sent the letter to the Imperialist commander at Arzon as a ruse, and then, that you sent it to Colonel Richard at Saint-Goazec, to save me, who was not in danger! You have told me both of those things. . . . Aymar, Aymar, you seem somebody I have never known! You—*you*—to do a disgraceful thing . . . to do it for me . . . and then, not daring to tell me, to lie about it!"

For a moment he knew dizziness. They were both drowning in a sea too strong for either of them. Yet surely there must be some raft to which one might cling. The love of years could not fail like this. . . . "*Avoye*, I swear to you that the two stories are not incompatible! The plan *was* a ruse—it remained a ruse, even though I used it as I did."

"But how am I to know that you did not make up the whole of what you told me in the orchard? So much of it was untrue—you admit that. What portions of it can I really feel safe in believing?" She suppressed a sob. "Did you ever meet M. de Saint-Etienne and make that plan at all?"

He gave her a look, but in words he did not answer—he could not. Who had the knife now?

"I cannot help hurting you!" cried *Avoye* desperately. "Do you think that it does not hurt me too? For you never sent that letter to Arzon—that was a lie—and you *did* know that I was detained!"

Aymar had found his voice again. "Yes . . . unfortunately!" He turned away for a moment. The waves had grown

mountains high; yet there was but one thing he would appeal to. "If you would only try to understand!" he said, facing her again; and he said it very quietly.

She was trembling and very pale; her eyes were full of tears as she answered, "I do understand—I do begin to. I understand now why you have taken no steps to clear yourself. The story that was good enough to dupe me with in the orchard is not good enough for the world! Yes, I do understand! You are not, as I had always dreamed, the living embodiment of our motto, the very soul of honour!"

He made a faint gesture. "Then nothing that I can say is of any use."

But she went on in her blind anguish, "If a saint—yes, if our Blessed Lady herself had come to tell me that you could do this . . . and then lie about it to me . . . I would not have believed it, Aymar! I *could* not. . . . And yet, you have done it!"

"Yes, I have done it!" He looked at her steadily. "And you are not going to try to understand or to pardon?"

"It is not a thing one could ever pardon!" she flashed out. "You have sold your honour!"

With that the blade was full in his own heart, so keen that its stab was partly physical, and involuntarily he put his hand to his side. But he took it instantly away, and gripped the back of the little gilt chair near him. He was the colour of ashes. Yet his head was high.

"No, that I have not done! And there is only one part of it which needs pardon," he said firmly, "and that is, that to save you needless pain, I told you some things which were not true. For what I *did* I do not ask your pardon."

"You can say that after Pont-aux-Rochers!"

"I can say that after Pont-aux-Rochers. What I deliberately slew, in the hope of saving you, was not my men, but my own . . . instincts. It is not in your power or anyone's to pardon me for *that* sacrifice."

The very look he gave her, at once proud, tender, unyielding and hurt to death, the very yearning of her heart for him, only met that other tide of horrified dismay in fiercer tumult and foam. Avoys de Villecresne burst into tears, and crying incoherently, "I cannot understand you . . . I never shall. . . . This will kill me, I think . . . but I cannot bear to see you . . . as you are now!" turned and went quickly out of the open window, leaving him alone.

And Aymar stood quite still, looking, not after her disappearing figure, but at the old Spanish leather screen, with its embossed border of pomegranates and its faded gold, which had for some minutes been to him the background to her slim body in its narrow gown, her aureole of burnished hair even, in a sense, to her passionate and bewildered voice—looking at it almost as if he did not realise that she was gone. Then he too went from the room.

(9)

"Oh, my dear fellow," cried Laurent, bursting rather unceremoniously into his friend's bedroom, "what a divine creature your mare is! To-day's was the best gallop I have ever had. It is a thousand shames that you yourself——What on earth are you doing, Aymar?"

For in the middle of the room, with his back to him, Aymar was on his knees before a little portmanteau. He did not look up, and for a moment did not answer, but folded and refolded a coat which had previously been lying in a huddle in the valise.

"I am going away," he said at length.

"Going away!" repeated Laurent, stupefied. "Now? Not to-day, surely! And where? . . . Aymar!"

He came towards him with the intention of putting a hand on his shoulder, but before he reached him Aymar had risen and was at the window. Standing there, still with his back to him, he said very low, "Everything has gone now. Laurent—everything."

The breeze fluttered the curtain, and except for that there was silence. But the hopeless pain in his voice seemed to go on vibrating after he had spoken.

"Who has told her?" asked Laurent after a long pause.

"Eulalie. She had got it out of Vaubernier after all."

"And she—Mme de Villecresne?" But there seemed no way in which the question could be put. Its answer indeed was the little valise gaping on the floor.

Aymar turned round. "Mme de Morsan did it deliberately, from malice, in the worst way she could. And the shock . . . I tried to explain . . . but, having had to lie the other day . . . it was too difficult for her . . . my cousin . . ." He broke off and indicated the valise. "I must

finish that. I suppose they will have taken the saddle off Hironnelle by now?"

Very gently Laurent laid his hand on his shoulder. "Mon ami, you cannot go like this. And you cannot ride Hironnelle, or any other horse, just yet."

Aymar shook his head. "It is of no use, Laurent. I must go. You have galloped Hironnelle. Besides, she does not pull. Perhaps you will fasten this for me? I think I have all I want."

Laurent looked at him, deeply troubled. What was he to do? "You will let me come too, then, Aymar, will you not? Any horse will serve for me."

"No, I am afraid I cannot let you come."

Impossible to be hurt or offended. The situation was beyond that. "But where are you going?"

Once more Aymar shook his head, and, as Laurent had not moved, knelt down again by the valise. But Laurent lifted it to a chair and strapped it up in silence. As he finished there came the earthquake quiver of the door which testified that Sarrasin had let himself down against it outside.

When he looked round Aymar was standing motionless, gazing at something in his hand.

"It was on the floor. It must have been in the pocket of that coat, which I was wearing the night it broke. . . . And I come on it again *now!*"

Laurent came to look. It was the lost *jartier*, symbol now of so much that was lost. Aymar gave a little laugh, and crushing it together threw it across the room towards the fireplace. Laurent had an impulse, soon gone, to protest; but what did it matter now?

"You will at least write to me, to Paris?" he said pleadingly. "Aymar, do consider——"

"Yes, I will write." He had pulled down a cloak. "It is only that I must get away to . . . to think things over. I have written a note to my grandmother. I dare not see her—she would guess."

An idea struck Laurent. He went up to him and put a hand on his shoulder once more. "Aymar, unless you will give me your word of honour that you are not going away to do . . . what you spoke of in the cave . . . I *shall* accompany you!"

The faintest trace of a smile came. "Dear Laurent! . . . I give you my word."

"May I at least come down the avenue with you?"

"Please. And . . . forgive my leaving you—your last night. I am ashamed . . . but I cannot stay till to-morrow."

Laurent made a gesture. "As if you ever needed to apologise to me!"

When they got to the door of the room he said suddenly, "Has Mme de Morsan left the house?"

"Yes, about an hour ago."

"Thank Heaven! Because—I suppose men have shot women before now!"

Again there was an almost imperceptible flicker of amusement. "Who do you propose should do it, Laurent—you or I?"

"I, by God! Don't tell me which way she has gone!"

"Long ago," said Aymar de la Rocheterie reflectively, his hand on the door-knob, his eyes, wide and dark with pain, fixed on him, "long ago I found, Laurent, that there never was a partisan like you. Nor a friend. Nor one who understood so well. . . . You do understand why I must go alone now?"

"Yes," said Laurent. And he added, with a miserable little laugh, "There is another partisan on the other side of the door who will not, however. You had better take him with you."

"No," answered Aymar, opening the door. Sarrasin was up in a second, his eyes on the cloak over his arm. "Go in and lie down, Sarrasin," said his master. "You cannot come with me."

The great dog gave him a long, melancholy look, licked his hand, and went in like a puzzled but obedient child.

There happened to be nobody in the stable-yard when they got there. Hironnelle was still bridled. Laurent slipped her saddle on again and helped Aymar into it.

He walked down the avenue by him in a dream. Nothing seemed to be true. He had never seen his friend on a horse before, and thought he should never henceforward see him, in memory, anywhere else. Save for his face, he looked so supremely himself there. But how long would he be able to stay in the saddle?

At the gates Aymar spoke at last. "I think, perhaps, that I will go to Eveno for a little. That is instead of taking Sarrasin with me . . ." He had reined up. "I will not sleep in a ditch, Laurent. I will not throw away all the care—the unspeakable care—you have lavished on this very useless

body; and I will write to you—soon. And for this going . . . forgive me again!”

He bent from the saddle and kissed him on either cheek; then Hironnelle carried him between the stone-balled gateposts. The sunlight struck across him; after that he was engulfed in the green gloom of the chestnuts. He did not turn round. Laurent watched him for a little; then he suddenly leant against the post with his arm over his eyes. When he removed it the road was empty.

(10)

“Perhaps we had better not wait any longer for my cousin,” said Mme de Villecresne at last to the guest. “He must be out, I think.”

The two of them were alone in the salon. Supper had been announced five minutes ago, since which event Laurent had been grimly waiting to cast his bombshell—as, obviously, it had not already been cast.

“He is out,” he replied briefly. “I would have told you before, Madame, had I realised that it was for him that you were waiting.” (For until that moment he had forgotten that Mme de la Rocheterie was not going to make her appearance at the meal.)

The news discomposed his companion, he could see. Did she then expect Aymar to come and sup with them as if nothing had happened?

“How strange!” she murmured. “Did he say, Monsieur de Courtomer, at what time he intended to return?”

“No, Madame. He has gone away, I fear—if not for good, at least for some time. So, if you will allow me——” He held out his arm. But Avoys de Villecresne stood perfectly still; she had gone white, then red, and was now white again. Oh, how was it possible that with such eyes as hers she could have done it!

“Gone away!” she whispered. But at that moment the door suddenly opened, and admitted Mme de la Rocheterie, on the arm of her elderly maid, colour in her delicate cheeks and a sparkle in her eyes. She might be indisposed, but she was clearly very angry. In her hand was a letter.

“That will do, Rose.” And when the door had closed she stood in the middle of the room, extremely erect, and said to Laurent, “As my grandson has so little idea of the courtesy due to a guest, to a departing guest, and one to whom he is

under such an obligation, I am constrained to take his place. If you will accept my apologies for his extraordinary behaviour, Monsieur de Courtomer, be good enough to give me your arm to the dining-room."

Laurent, petrified, offered it.

The discomfort of the meal was intense. For one thing only was Laurent grateful—that Mme de la Rocheterie was so wroth that, after announcing that the culprit had said he had gone off on business connected with the late Eperviers, she left the subject of Aymar's defection alone, and kept the conversation going on other subjects. Mme de Villecresne, on the contrary, seemed almost dazed.

After supper, half to Laurent's relief, the Vicomtesse withdrew again, leaving her granddaughter to give him coffee in the salon.

Laurent was in reality quite unwilling to accept even this conventional office from the hands of Mme de Villecresne. That he had come to think her charming only made this evening's revulsion fiercer. *She* a worthy mate for Aymar, whom she had forsaken in his bitterest need, stabbed when—nay, because—he had endured so much for her! But, though he was brimming with anger against her, he would probably have held his hand if she too had not murmured, as she gave him his cup, something not very coherent about an apology. How was he to guess that she was so torn with misery and dismay that she hardly knew what she was saying, and caught at any banality lest she should weep before him?

He drank off the coffee and cleared his decks for action.

"There is no need for apology, Madame," he observed. "The situation is not unfamiliar to me. It reminds me of the evening I spent when M. de la Rocheterie was turned out of Arbelles."

Mme de Villecresne looked faintly startled.

"You mean the evening after he was released?"

"No, Madame. He never was 'released' in the sense commonly attached to that term. He was turned out into the road, weak and ill, at a quarter of an hour's notice—turned out before the eyes of the whole garrison."

The blood began to ebb from Avoys's face. "But why——"

"Why? To humiliate him, and because, weeks earlier, he would not betray M. du Tremblay's plans. The attempt to wring information out of him then, when he was barely able to speak, nearly killed him as it was."

"Tried to wring information out of him—out of *Aymar!*" repeated Avoys in a horrified voice. "And turned out of Arbelles! But, Monsieur de Courtomer, why have I not been told these things before—why have they been kept from me, and I allowed to think . . ."

Laurent, who had been standing, sat down heavily. "Yes, it might have been better not. But he would do it—anything to spare you a moment's pain."

She stiffened. "I do not like being spared, Monsieur de Courtomer."

"No, Madame. And I know that you are brave; your cousin knows it too. But it is difficult for a man—for some men, that is" (he did not at the moment feel himself to be of their number) "to hurt a woman when by keeping the hurt to themselves they can spare her."

"I know they think that. They do not realise what a woman—what some women—feel about it. And need sparing a woman involve lying to her?" There was a passion of abhorrence in her tone—then, with extreme suddenness, she caught herself up. "I do not mean, of course, that my cousin lied to me!" And there was almost defiance in the gaze with which she met Laurent's. But as that young man was speechless, trying to digest this remarkable statement, she was able to hurry on to say, "Then I was misled when I thought he was well treated at Arbelles?"

"I verily believe that she is trying to prove *me* the liar, Aymar having suddenly become so immaculate!" thought Laurent. He replied soberly, "You must pardon me, Madame, but that was not a thing on which anybody consciously misled you. You assumed it, because he had excellent medical attention and was 'released.' But in other respects he was treated abominably—at least when the Colonel was there." And he proceeded to give her a résumé of what Aymar had undergone at their hands, told her how he had found him exhausted under a haystack—in short, what had nearly been the consequence of his 'release.'

Avoys turned her face away. After a silence she said, in a voice whose tremulousness was pierced with terror, "I knew that there was something more amiss with him than wounds! Monsieur de Courtomer, you swore to me . . ." She became inaudible; all he could catch was the word 'decline.'

"No, no, Madame," he said quickly, anxious to reassure her (for it was plain that in spite of what she had done she did care). "No, his condition is merely the result of the blood

he has lost. The doctor said so clearly, and that it would perhaps be as much as a year before he was strong again."

"How did he come to—to lose so much blood?" she asked faintly. "Was it then so long before the enemy found him after . . . after what happened in the Bois des Fauvettes?"

"Not so very long—not more than an hour perhaps; but you see he struggled hard to get free, and being fastened like that, upright——"

He broke off before the uncomprehending horror of the face she had raised. Was it possible that she did not know the essence of 'what had happened in the Bois des Fauvettes'?

"Don't you know?" he jerked out almost mechanically.

"Know what? Struggled to get free . . . *fastened* . . . Monsieur de Courtomer, what awful thing are you talking about?"

And Laurent cursed himself. Aymar had not told her the worst. Equally, of course, he did not wish her to know it.

"Oh, nothing, Madame," he stammered. "I would not for worlds have mentioned it had I not thought that you knew already."

"O God!" cried the girl rather hysterically, "more things kept from me! For pity's sake, Monsieur, try to forget that I am a woman!"

Laurent, recovering himself, bowed. "If you wish it." And on that, sparing her very little, he did tell her the true and full story of the Bois des Fauvettes. But he had the grace not to look at her meanwhile.

"Aymar made out that it was . . . all over very quickly . . . done in the surprise . . . almost a mistake," she said faintly at the end.

"On the contrary," replied Laurent remorselessly, "it was as protracted and deliberate as I have told you. . . . You can imagine that the Imperialists, finding him in the situation they did, were not likely to show him more consideration than . . . than some of his friends have done since. He was taken to Arbelles, senseless, in a farm cart. How he was looked on there I have told you. One would have thought he had paid enough. . . ."

He was very brutal; he knew it. He was going very far—he did not care. He was so worked up that a very little more would have brought out the story of the ramrod. But there was also a limit to what his hearer could endure. He saw her now get up, and ask him to excuse her 'for a few

minutes.' As he shut the door which he had held open for her he was almost sure that he heard a stifled sob on the other side.

Then he paced up and down the room thinking, "I have done it now! What would Aymar say if he knew! I don't care, I don't care! It was time she heard these things. Look what keeping this from her has resulted in!" And this was his most secret thought: "She has hurt Aymar bitterly, unbearably; *but I have hurt her!*"

He did not believe that she would reappear that evening; and she did not. By that he knew that his blows had gone home. After waiting a little he wandered round the salon again, coming finally to an anchor in front of the picture of the two children. *That* to end in this! "How could you?" he said to the laughing little girl, and soon afterwards went unhappily, guiltily, yet unrepentantly to bed.

(II)

When Laurent came downstairs next morning, after taking his farewell of the Vicomtesse, he was greatly surprised to find Mme de Villecresne, a little ghost in white organdie, in the hall—waiting for him, as was evident by her request that he would speak to her, if he had the time. And as he went out with her into the garden, which she seemed to indicate as the scene of their interview, his conscience rather smote him for last evening's free speech. But the mantle of the avenger had not yet fallen from his shoulders. Mme de Villecresne's first words, however, gave the panoply a perceptible twitch.

"I am very grateful to you for speaking to me as you did last night, Monsieur de Courtomer," she said. "I am sure you cannot have liked doing it." (Laurent surveyed the grass at his feet.) "I want, while I still have the chance, to ask you something more."

They were now in the middle of the rose-garden, by the sundial, and here she paused; paused too in her speech and looked away. Whatever she was going to ask him was not easy to bring out. He supposed he must give her time, even if he had to hurry for the diligence. So he looked down in silence at the sundial, which assured him in its antiquated French "*Icy ne verras que les heures sans nuages*," though a later hand had scrawled on the copper of the dial the cynical proviso, "*Si de telles heures existent!*"

Suddenly it came out, in a voice that shook. "Is it really true that it was all done for me?"

"Yes, Madame," said Laurent.

"Then it is the other story that is not true?" said the voice still more tremblingly.

At that the young man looked at her. "Do you mean the sending of the letter as part of a plan already made?—They are both true."

Mme de Villecresne did not exclaim that that could not be, nor did she ask him how it was possible. She went very slowly to the nearest rose-hedge and picked a rose or two. Then she came back. "That was what Aymar said," she murmured as if to herself. "If I could only see how the two stories are compatible—if I could only see it!" And the roses were clutched in her two hands as if they wore no thorns.

"Shall I try to explain it to you?" suggested Laurent gently. She seemed so young suddenly, only a girl—only his own age. She was amazingly free from rancour too, considering what his 'explanations' of last night had been like, for she said, with a really touching gratitude, "Oh, if only you would, Monsieur de Courtomer!"

Over the sundial then, Laurent explained to the very best of his ability, and found himself, like Aymar before him, tracing out the figures there meanwhile.

"But I cannot understand how Aymar could be so deluded!" broke out Mme de Villecresne at the end. "M. de Vaubernier, perhaps . . . but Aymar!"

The advocate reminded her that she *had* once obtained military information for her cousin, as he well knew; reminded her also of the known fate of Marie Lasserre. Before the cruel story of the practical joke he hesitated a moment in his new-found consideration, but for Aymar's sake she must hear it. Only, since she was so pale already, he suggested a move to the stone bench in the corner, and she complied. Then, in the very place where the lying information had, all innocently, been passed on to Aymar, he showed her how convincing it had been.

"And, Madame," he concluded, "put yourself in your cousin's place; suppose yourself waiting for his arrival here in this very garden, and suppose yourself receiving instead news of his desperate peril. And suppose further that you had in your pocket a plan for the destruction of the enemy which you had been on the point already of putting into practice, which indeed only needed the pretext of a bargain to

make it plausible. Do you mean to say that you would have gone peaceably to bed and said 'Nothing can be done'?"

"No," she said with a strangled sob. "No, indeed, I would not. And so he was tricked . . . tricked. . . . All this misery . . ." As she twisted her now empty hands in an effort to keep her composure Laurent saw how her roses had wounded them. "Yet Aymar told me," she went on, recovering herself, and facing him as pale and piteous as a child, "Aymar told me . . . some things that were not true . . . that were not true at all! I could not have believed that he would tell the merest fraction of a lie—even to spare me."

Laurent could not bear those little scratched hands, and in an almost fatherly way he took out his pocket-handkerchief. "If you will permit me, Madame . . ." and he dabbed at the beads of blood, the girl apparently quite oblivious of what he was doing. "I could not have believed that he would lie," she repeated.

Yes, that was the main stumbling-block of the situation. And Aymar had known it too.

"No, I can quite understand your feeling that about him," said Aymar's friend, loosing the passive hands. "I should think that a more naturally truthful person does not exist. And yet, Madame, there are instincts. . . . For instance, I dare say it has not struck you that last night, to shield him, you told a lie yourself?"

"I?" she exclaimed, and a flush stained her pallor.

"It was so instinctive that you have forgotten it already. I expect you were hardly aware of it at the time. Yet, to protect him from what I might think of him you told me, in so many words, that your cousin had *not* lied to you. Can you deny that?"

He smiled at her. He did feel himself rather like a wise uncle now—an odd sensation.

The flush ran over Avoys's face again. She dropped her eyes to a tiny red spot on her muslin gown. "That is quite true," she murmured.

"Do you think he would ever lie to save himself," went on Laurent, pursuing his advantage, "any more than you would?"

She shook her head mutely. "But, Monsieur de Courtomer, if he had not kept me so much in the dark—let me think that I knew it all—left me to be enlightened by Mme de Morsan . . . it is that which hurts so."

"Yes, I dare say that was a mistake," assented Laurent,

feeling about sixty by this time. "It was a risk, but only his consideration for you prompted him to take it. Yet, as far as that goes, were not you and he leagued together to keep your grandmother a great deal more in the dark? Did that trouble you—the thought of what was being kept from her?"

Avoye raised her eyes and looked at him. "No," she said. "It seemed the only, the right thing to do."

"One does those things instinctively, you see, with those one cares for," the sagacious young man pointed out to her.

She pondered this, her eyes downcast. Never could the mentor beside her have imagined himself admitted into so much intimacy. Heaven send he had made good use of it! He sat quite motionless, for it was a thousand times better to miss the diligence altogether than to cut short this wonderful chance she had given him. Aymar *could* not have explained fully to her yesterday, or else she had been in no state to comprehend the explanation.

As he revolved this conclusion Avoye herself said suddenly, "But I am forgetting; you will miss the coach if I keep you longer." She rose, growing less the child. "I can never thank you properly, Monsieur de Courtomer, for what you have done. At least now I understand." Her lip suddenly trembled. "I have really heard everything now, have I not?"

"Everything that matters," replied Laurent after a second's hesitation. The ramrod story had so thin a connection with her, and it would horrify her so—and his last night's desire to do this was now as dead as last night's dreams. "No," he exclaimed abruptly, "there is one fact more I should like you to know. Your cousin has done many brave things in his career, but you have never heard the bravest. And it was done for you."

Therewith he sat down again and told her the story of the interview with Colonel Richard.

(12)

There did not seem to be any place remote enough to shelter her grief and her remorse. Not the house, where Grand'mère might at any time find or summon her; not the rose-garden, where she, the faithless lover, had just said farewell to the faithful friend; not the orchard, where she had once been comforted . . . with lies, as she had said to Aymar yesterday. They *were* lies . . . but he was not a liar. Yet she had

told him that he was—told him that he had sold his honour, flung his justification back in his face. At the one moment in their lives when her trust in him should have stood firm it had snapped like rotten thread. After all that he had suffered for her sake it had remained for her, who loved him, to give him the last, the intolerable, enduring wound—the lover who, as she had just learnt, had not spared to crucify for her his pride and his most intimate feelings, and make an appeal to his victorious enemy for silence. And this Colonel Richard, a stranger, a foe, who knew everything, had taken his hand—whereas she . . .

The Aven, by which at last she sat dry-eyed, with a pain in her breast as though it were her own heart, and not Aymar's, which she had stabbed, rippled contentedly through the pastures . . . on its way to Pont-aux-Rochers. Yes, and despite the strain, the unfulfilment, it seemed to her now that these past years at Sessignes had been like this placid and contented stream, compared with the torment into which one hour had hurried her life. Oh, if only she had been able to keep the pale sunshine of those days, even though it should never have been transmuted into a brighter radiance! They would never come again—never, never.

The Aven smiled assent; a wagtail walked alertly at the brink, and the martins swooped above it. But it was going to Pont-aux-Rochers. . . .

That afternoon Anselme, Aymar's man, came to her and apologetically asked her if she had enough influence to get Sarrasin out of M. le Vicomte's room, as he refused to stir or to let any of the servants enter. She went in to try. She might have hesitated had she realised how full the empty room would be of Aymar's presence, and how poignantly the traces of his hasty departure would smite at her—the disorder which no one had repaired because Sarrasin would not admit even Anselme into the sanctuary which he was guarding. She could not bear to look at them, and turned her attention instead on the guardian himself who, having risen at her entrance with a soberly wagging tail, was now thrusting his nose into her hand. But even as she looked at him he stalked back to his post by the bed, and lay down in his former attitude, his nose on his paws.

Avoye walked to the door calling him, telling him he must come out of the room. But he only looked at her; he did not stir. The childish thought then came to her that, wise as he was, he knew that his master was soon coming back, and

that his refusing to move was a sign of this. But she must put his knowledge to a genuine test, for if he consented to come away, it would show that Aymar was not returning. So she took a coat lying on a chair and showed it to him, and while he sniffed at it she told him that he must take care of it downstairs. Then, going to the door, she held it out to him and called him. He lifted his head and gazed at her earnestly with his wonderful, inscrutable eyes, and she looked back at him and said in her heart, "Oh, *don't come*, Sarrasin!" Then with a sigh he got up and came to the door.

So she knew that Aymar was not coming back. She stood with the coat pressed closely to her and eyes that were beginning to swim; then she opened the door, called to a passing servant, told her to take the coat and the dog downstairs, and going back turned the key in the lock.

"I cannot bear to see you . . ." Well, she had her wish; she could not see him; she would never see him at Sessignes again. There was no danger of his finding her here in his room, any more than there was a chance of unsaying what she had said, of begging him to listen, to believe that she had spoken in the confusion of shock and fear. He was gone.

He was gone, and on the hearthstone, broken and thrown aside, lay the useless *jartier*. Had it been thrown there because he felt that all it represented was over for him now? Oh no, no, no! He might not be her lover any more, but he should not, he could not cease to be L'Oiseleur; and he should not throw away the talisman. She had not now the right to keep it for him herself, and she looked round the deserted room for a safe place in which to bestow it. Out of a half-open drawer there trailed the sleeve of a uniform. The *jartier* seemed to have more affinity with that than with anything else. She put it for a moment to her lips, and, taking out the coat, slipped the amulet into the breast pocket. Then she gave a miserable little laugh. "I always said I should end by being superstitious about that thing!"

She was on the point of leaving the room, when, passing by the bed, she perceived something she had not noticed before. By the impress on the coverlet it was clear that at some point yesterday Aymar must have thrown himself there, worn out, he who had never before in his life known other than reasonable fatigue. Probably he had dragged himself from this refuge to come down to *that* interview with her. Avoys bent over the pillow as though his head were really resting there, and broke suddenly into bitter sobbing.

How she got through the next three empty heartsick days she could hardly tell. On the third she became desperate. For if Aymer really were not returning the precious hours were slipping away, and she was doing nothing to make a last effort to retrieve her shattered happiness, or even to tell him how deeply she sorrowed for what she had done to him. He must be thinking—if he thought of her at all—that she was still of the same mind. But what could she do? She had no idea where he was, and unfortunately she had never asked M. de Courtomer if he knew.

But Eveno might know, because Aymer had spoken in his note to Mme de la Rocheterie of having gone on business connected with the Eperviers. Then it suddenly occurred to her that Aymer might actually be found in person at Eveno's cottage, conferring with him. What if she too went there in person? And, though the thought of that meeting was not easy to face, she set out that afternoon on horseback, a groom following her, for the cottage in the wood to which she had once declared that she would make pilgrimage.

But she had not ridden half the distance when she saw, between the chestnut boles, another horse and rider coming slowly towards her. The horse she knew in a moment. The rider . . . her heart stood still . . . No, certainly not Aymer. She moved forward again, and soon saw, with an indescribable sinking, that it was Eveno himself, riding the mare very softly, the reins in his right hand.

He had to shift them to his teeth before he could uncover, and remove the reins again before he could speak. But Avoye guessed.

"M. le Vicomte? Yes, Madame, he has been with us these three days. But he left this morning early, and I do not know where he has gone—a long distance, I think, for he went to catch the diligence. I am bringing Hirondelle back to Sessignes as he ordered me. Perhaps Madame would wish to ride her now, if I changed the saddles?"

"No," said Avoye with a catch in her breath, as she turned her horse's head homewards. "No, stay where you are, Eveno. I think M. le Vicomte would prefer it!"

(13)

And meanwhile the Vicomtesse de la Rocheterie had come to the end of her patience.

The relations of Avoye and Aymer for the last five or six

years, as with a shrug of the shoulders she would admit, had been frankly beyond her comprehension. Mid-eighteenth century in her outlook as she was to the marrow, she had often told herself that in her young days such a situation as continued year after year at Sessignes would have been impossible; no Frenchman who prided himself upon being a *galant homme* would have endured it for more than a month or two. The cold Northern strain in his blood, inherited from his and Avoye's paternal great-grandmother, presumably accounted for, though it hardly excused, Aymar's patience. A man might have a mistress, and he might have a wife, but for a young man to live for years under the same roof with the woman he loved, who was neither, really struck Mme de la Rocheterie at times as improper.

But now the arrangement, which one would have thought just about to issue in a more satisfactory relation, had received a shrewd blow of some kind. Of the hand that had dealt it there could be no doubt; it only remained to discover the weapon which had been used. To this end she had just sent for her granddaughter to her boudoir, and as she sat there, beautifully attired as usual, there was that in her air which told the girl at once what the subject of the interview was likely to be.

There was indeed not time for doubt. Mme de la Rocheterie, motioning her to a chair, said coldly:

"I should like to know, Avoye, for what reason you have driven Aymar out of his own house?"

The fact that the phrase embodied her own self-reproach did not prevent Avoye from resenting it. Her colour rose. . . . She could not possibly give the reason. . . . At that moment, with an almost sickening leap of the heart, she saw on the little table at her grandmother's elbow an opened letter in Aymar's handwriting.

"It is true that Aymar and I have had a . . . a disagreement," she admitted, her eyes fixed on the letter. "But I assure you, Grand'mère, that I had not the slightest idea that he was going to leave the house like this, and I . . . I hope he is coming back."

Her grandmother's very rings seemed to flash hostility at her as she stretched out her hand and deliberately dropped the letter into the little fire which, despite the summer weather, burnt on the hearth beside her. "No, he is not," she replied curtly, "and therefore I think I have a right to know why you are, as I say, keeping him out of his own house just

when he most needs a home and the care he can get there."

The thrust told. Avoye dropped her head. "I never meant to drive him away," she repeated.

"Nonsense," said Mme de la Rocheterie. "Do not pretend that you are ignorant of what you are doing where Aymer is concerned. You know only too well! Ever since your marriage you have been his evil genius—ever since you left your husband I have had to stand by and watch you slowly ruining his life. All I could do to enable me to bear the sight was to tell myself that a day would possibly come when you could repair the suffering you had caused him. That day has come . . . and how do you act? You choose the moment when he is ill, in straits of some kind—do you think I am so blind as not to know that?—to turn on him and——"

"Please stop!" said Avoye, trembling a little. "There is no need for you to say that again. I will leave Sessignes myself—at once—and then Aymer can come back."

Mme de la Rocheterie gave a short laugh. "As if that would put matters right! You know that he is besotted over you! If he comes back and finds you gone, I shall only have another scene . . . and I am getting too old for scenes. . . . But, for all that, *ma fille*, you are mistaken in thinking that you can play fast and loose with him like this!"

"Please tell me where he is?" asked Avoye humbly.

"There was no address. He is moving about he says . . . on affairs. He is well fitted in health for that just now, is he not?—I ask once more, Avoye, on what grounds you drove him away?"

"I told you, Grand'mère, that we had a disagreement, which I regret very much."

"Is that an answer to my question?"

"I cannot answer it more explicitly."

"Perhaps then you will be kind enough to enlighten me as to why this mysterious quarrel coincided with his return from captivity."

"But, Grand'mère, it did not! It . . . it came about suddenly, only the day he left, and it was . . . my fault."

"Indeed!" remarked the Vicomtesse. "And you are now penitent! Nevertheless I do not believe you. I had observed you for days before that—not at all the happy lovers I expected to see. Tell me, has Aymer taken any steps

yet about the dispensation for your marriage?—Answer me, has he?"

"No."

"Why not, pray?"

But Avoye could not, without betraying Aymar, reveal that the abstention was entirely on his side. She did not answer.

"You did not find him so attractive when he was unsuccessful, I suppose?" suggested Mme de la Rocheterie.

"You have no right to say that, Grand'mère!" retorted the girl, firing up. "It is false!"

"How then did you prevent so constant a lover from taking that necessary step?"

"I did not prevent him." The words escaped her against her will.

"You expect me to believe that Aymar himself was willing to relegate his marriage to I know not what epoch? He knows how long those matters take." She looked keenly at her granddaughter, and, again receiving no answer, said: "Then you must have shown him pretty plainly what your feelings were about it."

"I did," said Avoye, goaded, "but they were not what you think."

"You mean to tell me that you did not deter him?"

"I said I would marry him to-morrow if he had the dispensation."

"Oho!" said her grandmother. "So much warmth—after so much scrupulosity! And in the face of that, Aymar—*Aymar*—still hung back!"

"He had his reasons," said Avoye, very low. "I did not endorse them."

"So you say. If I am to believe that I must know what they were."

But Avoye shook her head obstinately.

"Perhaps he had discovered that he was not your only admirer? Aymar is somewhat exclusive."

"You can think that if you like," replied her granddaughter scornfully.

"Or that *you* were jealous—of Eulalie, for example?"

Avoye gave a little laugh. Yet she was unable to avoid reddening at the name, a fact which by no means escaped Mme de la Rocheterie, who said, watching her closely, "It certainly was curious that he should ride off in that extraordinary fashion the very day she left."

"Do you really think, Grand'mère, that he rode after *her*?"

"No, I am not such a fool," admitted the Vicomtesse. "Unless, indeed, he wished to question her more closely."

"Question her? Why should he?" For she was obliged to say something.

"Because I have been thinking over Eulalie's remarks that evening," answered her grandmother coolly, "and I am convinced that she was not making them innocently. And, since his return, Aymar's demeanour has been such—Yes, there *is* something behind this talk of treachery and mistaken judgment. You will kindly tell me, Avoys, what it is?"

"Why did you not ask Eulalie?" said the girl, her eyes on the ground.

The Vicomtesse waved the question aside. "What story is going about connecting Aymar unfavourably with his defeat?"

No answer.

"Is it some calumny based on his actual absence from the fight?"

"No."

"Or that he is—as I have suspected—shielding the person responsible for the ambush, the person who, I suppose, sent the necessary information to the Bonapartists?"

Avoys shook her head.

"What is it then? Have I not a right to know?"

Yes, she had, she had! Was she a woman who needed to be 'spared' any more than she, Avoys, herself? Mme de Villecresne lifted her head.

"People are saying that it was Aymar himself who sent the information."

Mme de la Rocheterie drew a long breath. Her hands clenched themselves on the arms of her chair, her eyes sparkled. Instead of being withered by the blow, she actually looked younger, rising to meet it. She laughed.

"As 'people' were about it, they might have invented a more likely slander. This one is somewhat ludicrously wanting in plausibility. Aymar betray his cherished Eperviers! But I thank you for telling me, since the imbecility of human nature has always delighted me."

She stooped to replace a piece of wood fallen from the fire, and, raising herself rather suddenly, caught sight of Avoys's expression. Her own changed with startling rapidity.

"Avoye! Is it *possible!* . . . Am I to take you for one of the imbeciles?"

"Of course, he sent it as a ruse," murmured Avoye out of her stiffened lips.

Mme de la Rocheterie took no notice.

"You believed it—you believe it!—My God, no wonder Aymar would not stay under the same roof with you! And this is your disagreement, your lovers' tiff, after which you dare to hope he will return to you as if nothing had happened! A La Rocheterie come cringing back to the feet of a woman who could believe him capable of such an infamy! I am glad that he left the house instantly!"

Avoye tried dizzily to think. The fierce, proud old woman, it was clear, would once more pay no heed if she were to repeat the explanation about a ruse. She did not need that explanation for a moment, she who had met the accusation merely with ridicule. Pray God then, that that was all the impression it would ever make on her! Some atonement, therefore, she herself could offer for the wrong she had done Aymar, by consenting to be sacrificed to that end . . . by holding her tongue and not justifying herself . . . by not saying that it was true, for he had told her so with his own lips. . . .

She bowed her head. She made herself, as far as she could, deaf to what her grandmother was saying; she took the lashes in silence, for Aymar's sake—though he could never know. . . .

This she heard, after other words:

"I had sent for you to tell you that, unless Aymar could be induced to marry someone else, you would have to marry him, after having kept him dangling all these years, the last of his name. But to demand such a sacrifice of him after this would be infamous! He is free of you at last—I thank God for it!"

It must surely be almost over now. But Avoye raised her head to see her grandmother looking at her with that emotion so terrible to witness in a person of one's own blood—hatred. Drawn and aged enough now, the Vicomtesse said, with astonishing venom, "If only the Fates had not made you that selfish and disastrous creature commonly known as a virtuous woman! Or was it calculated wisdom that has made you refrain from the attempt to sweep Aymar off his feet? You could have done it, I believe, if you had wished, for he has hotter blood than you think—and even in this new

century men are still men. . . . But you knew that it was better to keep yourself the unattainable, and because a lover may get tired of the attainable.—Yes, if you had been more . . . accommodating . . . he might have been tired of you by now, and have made a marriage worthy of him. And his wife, I fancy, would——”

“Stop, Grand’mère, stop!” cried Avoye, trembling from head to foot, and putting out her hands as though to ward off less the insults than the atrocious regret which beat through the old woman’s words. “Stop, you cannot know what you are saying!”

It was probable that this was true, though, save for the glitter in her eyes and a slight half-palsied movement of her hands, Mme de la Rocheterie’s manner did not suggest loss of self-control. She went on exactly where she had been interrupted:

“His wife, I say, would have displayed more faith in him than you—you, so immaculate and so base-minded! And all these years you have pretended to love him! Why, body and soul, the cheapest girl of the Palais-Royal has a better notion of love than you! Yet you are my granddaughter . . . at least I suppose so! But I shall hope, during the rest of my life, to forget it.”

“Oh, I think you have already succeeded!” cried Avoye, almost beside herself. “You, who bore my father, to say such things to me! If Aymar were here——” She stopped, suddenly choking.

Her grandmother leant back in her chair with an air of complete victory, and a smile that matched it. “Yes?” she enquired, “If Aymar were here—*now*—what then?”

Avoye stared at the pitiless old face and saw completely, nakedly, what her own lack of pity towards her lover had done for herself. The shield between her and that hostility was gone for ever; and till this hour she had not realised how efficaciously it had been her shield. Indeed there was nothing for her now but the roof of another.

“I shall start for Paris at once,” she said, clutching to her the last poor remnants of her composure. “You need not fear this time, that I shall ever return!”

“No, I imagine that I am scarcely in danger of being forced a second time to receive you back,” agreed her grandmother, and the smile grew sharper. “—Will you kindly ring the bell for Rose as you go out?”

CHAPTER IX

THE TOLEDO BLADE

"But in my terms of honour
I stand aloof, and will no reconciliation,
Till by some elder masters of known honour
I have a voice and precedent of peace,
To keep my name ungored."

Hamlet, Act v. Sc. 2.

"'Sir,' said he 'it is very fortunate for you that your face is so strong a letter of recommendation. Here am I, a tough old practitioner, mixing myself up with your very distressing business . . . and here is this lad . . . all, I take it, on the strength of your appearance. I wish I could imagine how it would impress a jury,' says he."—STEVENSON, *St. Ives*.

"But, Sir, for the care and love I have for you, whilst I can bear a sword in my hand I will venture for you."—THOMAS BURTON to THOMAS COKE, June 5, 1703.

(I)

THE owls were hooting round the little manoir at dusk almost loudly enough to disturb M. Nicolas de Fresne, as he sat at his monthly accounts, once more the country gentleman. Only a sword that was not his own, wrapped away in a press, and a certain very haunting memory, which sometimes followed him even in sleep, remained to mark his lieutenancy of the now extinct Eperviers. But Mademoiselle Berthe, the old lame sister who kept house for him, thought that he had aged during the last two months of inactivity.

She came halting in now with a lamp, and set it down by him on the table.

"You will ruin your eyes, mon frère."

"It is dark early this evening—early for the middle of July, that is," he said, looking up.

"It is raining," answered Mlle de Fresne. "—Dear me, was that a knock at the front door? Jeanne has gone to bed."

She went out, but was back in a moment. "It is a gentleman to see you on affairs, Nicolas. He did not give his name."

"Ask him to come in, then," said her brother, and, shuffling his papers together, went to put them in his desk.

He had his back turned, the door was already ajar, and the lid of his desk, escaping at that moment from his hold with a bang, prevented his hearing it close.

"De Fresne!" said a well-known voice.

He jumped round as if he had been struck. "Great God!"

A gaunt young man in a cloak was standing just inside the door, the lamplight and the dark panelling behind him conspiring to accentuate his pallor and the ruddy gleam of his hair—a young man whom de Fresne had last seen (and felt he should always see) motionless against a grey tree-trunk, ropes across him and a canopy of bright leaves above his bowed head. He was bereft of speech; a hand even sought the support of the desk behind him.

"I am afraid I have startled you," said Aymar gravely. "I am very sorry."

"I . . . I heard that you were dying . . . and therefore released," faltered the elder man. "But once I heard . . . I did not know what to believe . . ."

A brief, unmirthful smile flickered for an instant over the visitor's face. "I *was* released, but not because I was dying. I should like to speak to you, if I may."

De Fresne had pulled himself together. "Of course. Let me take off your cloak. Have you supped?"

"Yes, thank you. I have a room at the inn." He who had been L'Oiseleur was unfastening the cloak. "I must apologise for coming so late, but I was anxious to find you at home."

De Fresne took the cloak from him. "It is not late. It is only this cloak that is wet, I trust? You do not look . . ." He touched his arm. "Are you really flesh and blood, La Rocheterie?" he asked almost timidly.

"Well . . . flesh," responded Aymar, with the same little smile. "The other ingredient is somewhat to seek yet, I believe."

"I'll get you some wine," murmured his lieutenant. "Meanwhile, pray sit down—here."

"No wine, thank you," said Aymar, obeying him. "I shall not detain you long."

"But you must let me give you a bed to-night! I'll tell my sister at once."

"Thank you, but I am staying at the inn," replied his visitor for the second time, in a tone which did not admit of the renewal of the invitation.

De Fresne came slowly and sat down opposite him on the other side of the fireless hearth and felt uncomfortable. Although La Rocheterie's extremely quiet manner was free from any trace of hostility, it conveyed somehow a feeling of immense distance, as though he really were the ghost he looked like. And why would he not drink with him?

"I am sure," he burst out, "that you blame me—that cursed letter! And God knows I have blamed myself . . . bitterly, bitterly!"

"But why?" asked his guest calmly. "Surely I said to you in the wood that I did not blame you in the least, that you could have done no otherwise but bring back the letter and confront me with it. And as we neither of us had reason to suppose that I was not speaking *in articulo mortis*, that declaration should have had weight with you."

The faint flavour of irony, or imagined irony, and his own memories made his hearer turn his head away. "If you knew how it has haunted me," he groaned. "Surely I might somehow have prevented . . . what happened. At any rate, I swear to you, La Rocheterie, that I have not known a day's peace of mind since!"

"Then I am very sorry to hear it," replied Aymar. "Your unnecessary remorse only adds another item to the account against me. Yes," he added, with more warmth in his voice, "it *is* unnecessary, de Fresne. I give you my word of honour—if you will take it—that I have absolutely no condemnatory thoughts towards you. But, not having passed through purgatory yet, I am less charitably disposed towards—others. Tell me, what became of Magloire and Company?"

But de Fresne had dropped his head on to his hands. "It is no good," he said hoarsely. "You cannot really absolve me . . . for I cannot absolve myself. You saved me, and I let that happen to you."

Aymar sat up in his chair. His face softened. "My dear de Fresne! Will you accept my hand on it? Come—and think no more of it!"

He held it out; no handshake had passed between them as yet. De Fresne looked up and saw it, outstretched so

far that a dull red weal was visible above the wrist. He took the hand.

"Now please let there be no more talk of haunting," said L'Oiseleur with a smile. "And tell me what you did with the remnants."

"I disbanded them. There was nothing else to be done. After . . . after the Bois des Fauvettes they turned against Magloire and Hervé, but they would not follow me. . . . I debated a long time, La Rocheterie, about having those two brought to justice, but at the moment the report was that you had died in the hands of the Imperialists. I may have been wrong, but it seemed to me that to rake up a scandal when you were not alive to defend yourself, and when, with the best will in the world, I could not properly defend you because I did not know the nature of your bargain with Colonel Richard, was not the happiest thing for your memory."

"I dare say you were right not to press for justice," said Aymar. "Indeed, as it happens, I am glad that you did not. For I have come to ask you a favour."

De Fresne got up. "I think I can guess what it is, and I shall do it with all my heart, and at once." He went to the black oak press, deeply carved with figures of saints, that stood against the wall, and returned with a long object wrapped in a strip of brocade.

"You want this back again. I have kept it carefully, you see. It is yours, L'Oiseleur." And across his guest's knees he laid his surrendered sword.

But Aymar shook his head and held it out to him again. "Not in that way, my friend! And what has happened that you should now restore it to me? The day I gave it up you said you could not serve under me if I retained it."

De Fresne flushed. "But since that interview——"

"Since that interview—what?" Aymar took him up. "I am farther from being cleared than ever. You told me then, most truly, that I stood in a terrible situation. Do I stand in one less terrible now, with the scars of my own men's bullets on me?" And, seeing that de Fresne had nothing to answer he got up, laid the sword on the table, and went on, "Only one hand can give that back to me, and it must first be delivered to that hand. Yes, I am going to press for an enquiry, as you advised me. In a sense, therefore, you were right in thinking that I had come for my sword. I am here

to ask you if you will assist me in the endeavour to regain it—but if I ask too much——”

“Too much? I am entirely at your service!”

“You mean that? Thank you. I want you then, if the General will give me a court of enquiry, to accuse me before it.”

“What!” cried his lieutenant. “That! Never, never!”

“But it is what you would have had to do last May!”

De Fresne sat down again and ran his hands through his hair. “I would do anything to help you, La Rocheterie. But I cannot do that. You offered your life for mine—yes, I know that the circumstances demanded it, and I should, I hope, have done it as unhesitatingly myself in your place. But you did offer it. . . . No, nothing would bring me to it.”

Aymar considered him. “Then I shall have to accuse myself,” he said reflectively. “Or perhaps the General will appoint an accuser. Perhaps he will make a regular court-martial of it, and arrest me; or I can give myself up. But I have not thought out any details; I came to you first. And I should have liked the letter to produce. But I suppose Magloire——”

“The letter!” exclaimed de Fresne. “No, Magloire has not got it. *You wish you could produce it! Are you mad?*”

“I don’t think so,” said Aymar rather painfully. “But I wish to keep nothing back. Did you get possession of it again then?”

“I did,” replied his lieutenant. “But I am thankful to say that you cannot possibly do anything so crazy as to produce it against yourself. I destroyed it that very night. I only wish I had done so a few hours earlier.”

The faint colour crept over Aymar’s lips again. “You destroyed it—for my sake! My dear de Fresne, that was very good of you! But, had it still been procurable, I should have felt in honour bound to lay it before the Court.”

“Well, I am thankful to say that you cannot!” retorted de Fresne. “The only written evidence against you exists no longer. And if you will take my advice, La Rocheterie, you will leave the whole matter alone now. It’s too risky. Think of the time that has elapsed—not, God knows, through any fault of yours!—Tell me, how long were you against that damned tree before the Bonapartists found you? When I came back you were gone; but that was some three hours afterwards.”

“You came back!”

"Did you suppose I was going to leave you there, alive or dead! Were you . . . but perhaps you would rather not talk about it. . . . At any rate let us settle this question first. I do implore you to give up the whole idea."

Aymar looked at the wrist of the hand which lay on his knee. "Do you know what people all over the district—all over Brittany, perhaps—are saying about me? Just what you prophesied, of course. Could I be worse off if the Court did not clear me?"

"Yes, indeed you could," said de Fresne earnestly. "The story would be even wider spread; you would be branded for ever. Whereas now it is always possible for it to be said that you disdain to take any notice of it. And there are always men who never will believe you capable of such a thing. I know there are; I have met them. I met a man the other day who knew you slightly, and he laughed at the idea; said that those who believed the charge did so from personal jealousy. If you go before a court and are not completely cleared, to all intents and purposes you will have done—what you did—with the worst of intentions. You will be utterly ruined."

Aymar shook his head and caressed de Fresne's sleepy spaniel. "Not more ruined than I am now."

De Fresne got up and took a turn distractedly about the room. "I don't think you look at all the possibilities of what might happen if you were not acquitted. You wear uniform; you hold the King's commission, if only for form's sake. They might degrade you; take away your cross. For the love of God, L'Oiseleur, don't run that risk!"

But Aymar was unmoved. He sat very still, as he had sat all the time; now he was pleating the spaniel's silky ear.

"Our positions are indeed strangely reversed, my dear de Fresne, since that day! You were horrified then at my inclination to let things take their course." He stopped playing with the dog, leant back in his chair and looked straight up at him. "I can see why you are now opposed to my taking action; it is because you think my position so much more hopeless."

And once again de Fresne did not answer.

"I have been trying for some weeks," went on Aymar quietly, "merely to live down the charge. I had a good reason. That reason exists no longer . . . and the charge is not being lived down. I am going to take the other course now . . . even if it kills me."

"I should say it very probably would then," commented the elder man, looking down at him. "I think it's crazy . . . but you always would take risks. . . . I will do what I can, however, so long as you do not require me to accuse you."

"You are not so Roman as I thought you were," murmured Aymar with a smile.

"I am not going to accuse you," repeated de Fresne doggedly. "For the rest, it is of no use appealing to you?"

"It is of no use."

"Then I will give evidence for you—anything you wish but bring an accusation."

"I do not know that you will be able entirely to avoid it," said Aymar with a faint suspicion of amusement. "But you shall not be a formal accuser; I promise you that.—Now I will tell you the true nature of my bargain with Colonel Richard."

(2)

"Undoubtedly," said Tante Clotilde dogmatically, "Laurent is in love; and I only pray, Virginia, that the object of his passion may be found to be suitable, for I have observed in our great-nephew a regrettable fund of obstinacy. But the head of the house of Courtomer cannot follow his own choice in marriage, irrespective of other considerations, as is so lightly done in the country where he has had the misfortune to be brought up."

"And as his father did," said Mme de Courtomer rather maliciously.

"Nonsense!" retorted the old lady. "As a Seymour, you were a perfectly suitable match for Henri."

"You are too good, ma tante," replied Virginia de Courtomer. "But Henri did follow his own choice, all the same. . . . And why you should fear that Laurent's should fall on a soubrette or something of the kind I do not know. Moreover, I very much doubt if he *is* in love."

Mlle de Courtomer heaved in her arm-chair. "You will allow me, with a vastly longer experience of life than yours, Virginia, to differ from you! A young man who has fought and endured captivity for his King comes back to find that King replaced on the throne by a glorious victory, Paris in festive humour, himself not uncongratulated for having drawn the sword . . . and what is he like? Restless, moody, almost uninterested in the consummation towards

which he has the honour of having contributed, wanting in the *petits soins* towards my sisters and myself in which, I will say, he has never yet failed, and—always anxious for the visit of the postman! There is only one inference to be drawn. He is in love, or entangled, with some woman he has met in the West. Odile thinks, and I agree with her, that it is probably this *Mme de Villecresne* at *Sessignes*, because he will not speak much of her, and because he stayed on there unnecessarily long after his escape. And I only hope that his infatuation may not, in consequence, have led to a difference of opinion with her cousin, the *Vicomte de la Rocheterie*; for in spite of the admiration which *Laurent* has—which we must all have—for the hero of *Penescouët*, I have observed that he suffers, at times, from a considerable *gêne* in speaking of him.”

To this summary of her son's condition, no count of which she could deny, *Mme de Courtomer* made no answer. She had observed all these symptoms herself. Certainly *Laurent* was not happy. Moreover, she knew something which, luckily, the old ladies did not—namely, that since his return he had withdrawn a large sum of money from his bankers . . . for an excellent object, he had assured her. She did not doubt his assurance, and sometimes she thought he was going to tell her what was troubling him, but, just because of the great confidence between them, she would not ask. Yes, the change in him was marked; she could hardly wonder, even if she resented it, that his great-aunts should talk him over in this fashion. He had become so pensive, and certainly did display an extraordinary interest in the postman.

That afternoon an old friend of her husband's, a general of distinction, called upon her. *Laurent* came in at the end of his visit.

“Ah, here is our captive hero!” observed the visitor as he shook hands. “You do not look any the worse for your imprisonment, so I hope that it was not rigorous. More boring, probably—eh, young man?”

“I do not fancy that *Laurent* found it exactly boring, General,” said his mother, smiling. “He had a wounded companion whom he helped to nurse; that gave him employment. He has the happiness of having contributed to the *Vicomte de la Rocheterie*'s restoration to health—*L'Oiseleur*, you know.”

The old soldier stiffened curiously. “Ah—really!” he

remarked, and looked hard at Laurent for a moment. Then he changed the subject.

But as he was taking his leave he held Mme de Courtomer's hand and said gravely, "My dear lady, if a very old friend may venture on a word of advice, I think it would be as well if you kept silence as to your son's charity in imprisonment."

"Mon Dieu, why?" exclaimed the Comtesse in astonishment.

"Because," said the General still more gravely, "I grieve to say that it was mistaken charity."

"—Monsieur—" began Laurent hotly, but the guest went on unheeding,

"—Since it was bestowed on an unworthy object. And, in point of fact, it was no charity at all. It would have been a thousand times better to have allowed that—that incredibly treacherous young man to die. But your son, no doubt, did not know what he was doing."

"I did know!" said Laurent, white, his head flung back. "I knew all the time of the abominable slander on a man as honourable as you or I! . . . My God! my God! and now it is going about Paris!"

The distinguished soldier looked at him and was perhaps a little moved by his distress. But he spoke no less sternly, "Can you wonder, Monsieur de Courtomer? What steps have been taken to check it? An innocent man must have cleared himself by now of a charge so infamous—La Rocheterie betrayed . . . sold . . . his own men to the enemy," he explained to his hostess. "You did not know, of course. I am sorry to have shocked you, but you see why I counsel you, Madame, in your son's best interests, to be discreet." He looked once more towards that son, who had turned his back and laid his head against the mantelshelf—and he forbore to utter a farewell which would obviously have gone unreciprocated.

And when Mme de Courtomer came back across the great salon Laurent had flung himself down in an arm-chair, and buried his head at the side. Herself rather pale, she put her arms about him. "My dearest boy, this is what has been troubling you then! Tell me, my darling, if you can!"

But all that Laurent could get out for a long time was, "It's not true—it's not true!" And later the cry changed to, "If only he could do something—if only I knew where he was now—his last letter said so little . . . and there were such difficulties."

It was therefore quite in accordance with probability that there was borne in to Laurent next morning, with his coffee and roll, a letter sealed with a swan. He tore it open, and read, in that handwriting which he hardly yet knew, these words:

"MY DEAR LAURENT,—Since I last wrote the difficulties which Sol de Grisolles saw in the way of granting my request for a court of enquiry have disappeared, and the Court will sit to investigate my case as Aurannes on August 12th. I shall have de Fresne, Colonel Richard, and Saint-Etienne to give evidence on my behalf, and through the latter I have hopes of getting that M. du Parc who was present, as you may remember, at my meeting with him at Keraven.

"I do not think that you can bring evidence on any point which is likely to arise, or I should not hesitate to call you as a witness, though I am summoning as few as possible, not wishing to involve them in an unpleasant business. As things stand, therefore, it is quite unnecessary for you to take the tiresome journey to Aurannes. But I know that I can count on your good wishes. I shall need them.

"I will let you know the finding of the Court, though you will probably learn it from other sources. Should it be unfavourable I see nothing before me but to leave France. I might go to the United States perhaps."

"Thank God!" said Laurent aloud, laying down the letter on the bed. And indeed his first feeling was one of unmitigated relief. This was the only door. But that thankfulness was succeeded by a deep disappointment. Why had Aymar in the past said those things about his friendship if he could thus easily dispense with it in this most critical hour? He read the letter, so brief and restrained, again. No, he did not seem to want him to come—he who would almost give his own good name to clear his friend's. Or was the desire for his presence there, kept with difficulty in leash, in the words which looked so colourless? Aymar had given him date and place . . . though with only just time enough to get there.

The letter, which occupied only one page (for Aymar wrote a very small hand) had fallen open as it lay, and . . . yes, there *was* something added on the inner page! Laurent snatched it up, and read these words, in marked contrast, even in the handwriting, to the composure of the rest:

"I doubt if I can face it, when the time comes, without you, Laurent."

Two minutes later, gulping his coffee, he was thus addressing his hastily summoned valet: "I want my valise packed immediately—put my uniform in—and find out the Brittany diligences . . . and get hold of Mme la Comtesse's maid, and ask her how soon my mother can receive me. I am going away at once."

(3)

It was quite dusk when Laurent rode into Aurannes, but the little Breton town was stirred by the presence of troops into an animation which it could never have known in ordinary times at that hour. He put up his hired horse at the Hôtel de l'Ecusson, was told there where to find the little house where M. de la Rocheterie was believed to be lodging, enquired of the old woman who owned it in what room he should find her guest, and went up unannounced. Only, outside the door, he paused a moment as once at La Baussaine; then he opened it and went in.

Aymar was sitting at the table facing him, under the lamp, the dear and well-known head bent over some papers. He did not instantly look up, and Laurent had time to take in the rather comfortless little room, the remains of a meal of cheerless aspect at one end of the table, and the fact that there were at least three grey hairs in the bright, lamplit bronze. Then L'Oiseleur abstractedly raised his head.

And all that Laurent had ever done or suffered for him was trebly repaid in that one moment of time when he saw the sudden incredulous joy on his face. The papers went to the floor.

"You, Laurent, you!"

"Who else?" asked Laurent. "Didn't you mean me to see that postscript?"

"I was only afraid that you wouldn't," said Aymar, half laughing, half choking, as they embraced. "Have you really forgiven me, then, for leaving you in that abominable fashion at Sessignes?"

"I forgive you nothing," responded Laurent ambiguously, and, holding him at arm's length, surveyed him with critical eyes. Aymar was very thin, but there was a trace of colour in his lips if nowhere else. He was in uniform, the very

uniform in which Laurent had so admired him in Paris, and once more he was wearing the cross of St. Louis on his breast. But he had no sword.

"I do not think much of your choice of lodging," observed the newcomer after a little, looking round the room. "Could you not have found something more comfortable?"

"Very likely," responded Aymar unperturbed. "But the first consideration was to find someone who would take me in without demur. And I knew that Mme Leblanc would do that."

Laurent opened his lips to say something, and thought better of it. But it seemed horrible that L'Oiseleur should make this statement without a shadow of his old bitterness, as if it were the most natural thing in the world for his presence to be objected to.

"I did not, however, propose to condemn you to Mme Leblanc's cooking if you did come," went on his friend. "De Fresne tells me that there is still a room or two at the Hôtel de l'Ecusson."

Laurent shrugged his shoulders. "I shall stay here—if there is a corner anywhere. You won't say, 'If you do, I shall not sleep under this roof,' will you?"

Aymar gave him a strange, sweet little smile, and put his hand for a moment over his. "I know better now than to argue with you, mon ami; but I would like to make one appeal to you, on the score of your own reputation. It will not do you any good, and it might do you untold harm, to be seen with me, to lodge with me. You know——"

"Is that why M. de Fresne has so carefully installed himself at the Hôtel de l'Ecusson?" broke in Laurent hotly. "And your friend Saint-Etienne, where is he? Has he been equally prudent?"

Aymar looked at him rather oddly. "Saint-Etienne is . . . much farther away," he said, with what seemed an effort. "And I implore you, Laurent, not to harbour a grudge against the excellent de Fresne. He does so hate this whole affair; it is against his better judgment, he puts himself in rather an unpleasant position, and yet he is giving evidence at my request."

"It is the least he can do," retorted the implacable Laurent. "But what about Saint-Etienne, your most important witness, it seems to me—unless you have secured that M. du Parc. Why do you say he is far away? I hope you have both of them?"

Aymar looked down at the floor. "Laurent, I ought not to have allowed you to come here—I ought not indeed! I did try in my letter not to let you see how much I wanted you, but it was too strong for me. Yet at least I did not know the worst when I wrote. . . . I have neither of those two as witnesses; Saint-Etienne I can never have."

"Good God! why not? Aymar, your whole case——"

"Saint-Etienne is dead," answered Aymar gravely.

And he told his stunned hearer how, when he made up his mind to court enquiry, he had written to Saint-Etienne to ask him if he would give evidence on his behalf, and where M. du Parc could be found. No answer came. Meanwhile Sol de Grisolles made arrangements and fixed the date. Then came a letter from Saint-Etienne's relatives telling Aymar of his death from wounds received in a skirmish in July. Of M. du Parc they knew nothing whatever; and the name was so little uncommon that to trace him—Aymar had already tried—was hopeless.

"But, Laurent," he concluded, "I could not draw back now. Think of inviting an enquiry and then, on the eve, withdrawing from it! Sol de Grisolles could not give me any longer because he is disbanding. And in any case I think the result was doubtful. Only, for the sake of the name I bear, I felt that I must face it. I came to that resolve at Eveno's, but it was a struggle; it took three days to bring me to it." He smiled. "And now it seems hopeless. But I shall make a fight for it, though, as far as direct testimony goes, I am now empty-handed. My only chance is that what testimony I *can* bring will produce a favourable general impression. Several people here have personally assured me that they would believe me on my bare word. Perhaps the Court also may have an inclination to believe me because of my former reputation. I had one once."

Again he spoke without bitterness; but Laurent shivered. The new Aymar discomposed, a little frightened him. He asked of whom the Court consisted.

Aymar told him. And when he came to one name, Laurent gave a joyful exclamation.

"Du Tremblay! Du Tremblay himself! Oh, luck at last! I overheard him speak so warmly of you in Paris, and when he learns what he owes you——"

"Owes me? Oh, you mean that cipher business. But he will not hear anything about that, my dear Laurent. The only evidence which I might call on you to give would be

why I was unable to court enquiry earlier, if the point were brought up against me. My story, as I shall give it, will end with the last bullet. I am afraid that they are sure to want to hear something about that affair, and I should prefer to tell them details rather than to have them dragged out. But you need not fear that I shall dilate upon it."

How, feeling about it as he did, he could face the prospect of having that horrible business in the wood gone into at all, Laurent could not conceive. If he were of less sensitive fibre . . . but then, perhaps, he would not have also 'the ice-brook's temper.'

But he had already become aware of a singular and subtle change in Aymar, the advent of a strange kind of calm, as if a man should come out of very deep waters with something of himself washed away, yet with something added. His composure seemed perfectly natural and effortless, but, considering what he had to face to-morrow, and what hung on the results of that ordeal, Laurent could not believe that it had been achieved, or was being maintained now, without heavy cost. And had it to do with that last, that cruellest hurt of all? He thought so. But perhaps the hand which gave the wound had already tried to heal it?

"Does Mme de . . . de la Rocheterie know of the enquiry?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes. But she does not realise how serious it is for me, because when I wrote a few days ago I merely told her that I had asked for an investigation into the rumours of treachery at Pont-aux-Rochers. I have had a line in return, approving of my action." He smiled, a little ironically. "And I hope that, whatever the verdict, she may never learn the . . . details of the evidence."

Laurent knew what he meant by that phrase. After a moment Aymar added, "I wrote to my cousin also, saying that I hoped at least to keep her name out. That *is* my hope."

But had he heard from her? Presumably not, since he immediately changed the conversation, and began to talk about the way in which he was laying out the first instalment of Laurent's money on the disabled and widows. After which he got up and took something off the mantelpiece.

"Such an extraordinary coincidence, Laurent! I threw this away, as you know. When I put on my uniform, for which I had sent to Sessignes, there was the *jartier* in a pocket!"

"Well, don't throw it away, again!" said Laurent. "It

must mean that the luck has turned.—Aymar, wear it to-morrow! To please me, let me see if I cannot somehow fasten it on to your arm again! It's nonsense, I know . . . but just to please me!"

And, to please him, his friend consented. Moreover, so thin was his arm now that, with the aid of needle and thread from Mme Leblanc, Laurent did succeed in fastening the rush bracelet in its place once more.

"I have only recently learnt from Eveno," said Aymar, as Laurent put in the last stitch, "of another legend which seems much truer than the story about running water. If you are fortunate in . . . if you have obtained or are about to obtain your heart's desire, the *jartier* will leave you." He pulled down his sleeve. "And apparently," he added, trying to smile, "when that is lost for ever the *jartier* comes back. It has already found me once—you remember when?"

An immense pity for him invaded Laurent. He was rather staggered too.

"But this return must mean that you have your luck again—that you are going to come through, to-morrow."

"Perhaps. I admit that I need something to counteract—— Come in! . . . Ah, de Fresne, let me make known to you my friend Monsieur de Courtomer, of whom I have told you."

The two men bowed, a little stiffly. "Well, Monsieur de Courtomer," said the newcomer starkly, "if you have heard the last piece of news, I think you will admit that we are here on a fool's errand."

Laurent fired up. "As M. de la Rocheterie is now irrevocably committed to this enterprise, Monsieur," he retorted, "that is hardly an encouraging view of the situation to put before him!"

"M. de la Rocheterie does not need that view to be put before him," interposed Aymar. "It is already his own.—Sit down, de Fresne."

Laurent moved away. That was the man who with his own eyes had seen the outrage wrought on Aymar, who, in addition to his own indirect share in bringing it about, had not even got himself scratched in trying to prevent it! And yet he surprised on this man's face, as he spoke in low tones with L'Oiseleur, an anxiety much more selfless and acute than his rough and untactful words had suggested.

It was late when de Fresne left. Laurent's sleep was heavy but broken, and he spent a large portion of it in

giving evidence of the most ridiculous and disconnected order.

He was glad therefore when morning came, for he had yet to realise how its hours were going to drag—since the enquiry did not begin till two o'clock in the afternoon. The only event of importance was the arrival of Colonel Richard for consultation with Aymar. His dismay when he heard of the disastrous gap in the evidence was obvious, though not so nakedly displayed as de Fresne's, but he dismissed the idea of turning back, which, indeed, Aymar had never seriously contemplated. "When a man has courage of your type," were his parting words, "circumstances themselves crumble before him. In any case, you have taken the right course."

"And without you I could not have taken it," responded Aymar warmly. "I only hope that you will have no cause to regret your great generosity in coming here on my account."

With a meal, at which Laurent ate even less than Aymar, the interminable morning did come at last to an end, but when half-past one sounded from a clock outside, and Aymar put his notes in his pocket and rose, Laurent heartily wished it were nine o'clock again. The enquiry was to be held in the Hôtel de ville, and Aymar had refused to drive the short distance thither. Moreover, since he equally refused to have his actual witnesses go with him, if Laurent had not joined him he would apparently have set forth entirely alone for the place of ordeal—and that through what might possibly be itself an ordeal. Neither of them knew how the feeling went in Aurannes.

At the last moment Laurent, unobserved, divested himself of his recently assumed sword. Aymar de la Rocheterie should not be the only man to walk through the streets that afternoon in uniform but disarmed. They set forth side by side.

It was a hot day, and the streets in their afternoon shadelessness were not very full. For that reason the figure of L'Oiseleur was all the more conspicuous, and Laurent felt it. Only a faint hope sustained him that a spectator might wonder which of the two swordless officers was he whose once brilliant name was so tarnished. But though everyone within sight stared or turned to look, there was no demonstration; a few passing officers even saluted him, though a couple very obviously crossed the street to avoid him. Only, in traversing the market-place, they came full on a Chouan

of Gambier's legion, and he, as they passed, looked full at the two young men, and then deliberately spat on the ground at Aymar's feet.

"—Don't, Laurent!" said Aymar in a low voice, clutching his arm and pulling him on, turning on him meanwhile a face for the moment like a dead man's. "Remember, for God's sake, that I have my own temper to keep!"

Only a few scarcely interested spectators lounged round the semicircular steps of the Hôtel de ville. At the top Aymar suddenly caught his friend's arm again.

"What have you done with your sword?"

Laurent, whose teeth were still clenched, glanced down at his side. Why was Aymar so observant! "Ass that I am, I must have forgotten it! But it is of no consequence; I am not here on duty."

"Forgotten it—when you had it on five minutes before we started!" The grasp tightened. "Laurent, who but you would have thought of such a thing!" He gave him a long look, removed his hand with a rather shaken little laugh, and they went in.

(4)

The hall of the Hôtel de ville at Aurannes was a good deal too large for the purpose to which it was now being put, for the proceedings were not really public, only the military being admitted. Yet at first there seemed to Laurent to be a crowd of faces; afterwards they resolved themselves into those of about thirty or forty officers, ranged fanwise on either side of the dais on which, at a long table, sat the Court itself.

But, after the first slight shock of dismay on finding that the audience was not directly behind Aymar but facing him, the young man had eyes for the Court only. There were nine of them, all of superior rank. In the middle sat Sol de Grisolles, the general-in-chief of Brittany, the man who had been Cadoudal's lieutenant sixteen years ago, and who, being implicated in his subsequent conspiracy, had suffered an imprisonment of ten years in surroundings so horrible that his health and vigour were gone, his eyesight almost ruined, and that he was an old man at fifty-four. There was his major-general, the Marquis de la Boëssière, on whom the King had actually bestowed full powers of leadership for the province, but who, on finding Sol de Grisolles already in

command, had voluntarily subordinated himself to him, the abler to the less able; and there were the Chevaliers de Sécillon and de Margadel. The others Laurent could not identify . . . save one, indeed, the man who owed so much to his disgraced comrade, and who probably did not know it—M. du Tremblay, seen previously in such different surroundings.

An orderly showed them their places. In front of the dais, but at some distance from it, a table and a chair had been set for Aymar. Behind him, seats were to accommodate his witnesses, but they were apparently to give their evidence from another table, placed in a line with his. Laurent wondered if he would ever succeed in standing at it. But no one challenged his right to sit with de Fresne and Colonel Richard and an unknown man, whom he guessed to be the landlord of the *Abeille d'Or*.

Then, after a pause which seemed interminable, after some consultation among the nine officers enthroned there, whispered comments from the onlookers and a steady fire of glances directed at the pale uniformed, swordless young man seated alone at the little table, the General rose in his place.

"I wish to remind you, gentlemen," he said, as emphatically as his broken voice would permit, "that this is not a court-martial. Though the Vicomte de la Rocheterie's sword lies before us on the table (having originally been surrendered in circumstances about which we shall shortly hear) he is in no sense under arrest. He is here of his own free will, having asked for an investigation into his recent conduct, about which, as you are doubtless aware, very damaging rumours are in circulation, although no formal charge has been preferred against him. You, his fellow-officers, are accordingly met here to give him an opportunity of clearing himself from the very grave imputation under which he rests, of having betrayed his own men to the enemy on the night of the 27th of April last." He paused a moment and cleared his throat. "The procedure which we shall follow is that M. de la Rocheterie will first give us in outline his account of what occurred, and will then go over it in detail, producing his witnesses and answering any question which the Court may put to him. And, since there is no accuser, we are ready for him to begin at once."

So the lists were fairly set for what Aymar had said last night was a hopeless fight. He got to his feet, and, after a few words of thanks to the General-in-chief and the Court

for consenting to hear him, electrified everybody—and Laurent not least—by saying, firmly and quietly:

"I wish to begin by stating that I do not deny having sent certain information to the enemy on the night of 27th April, nor that my action was the cause of the disaster at Pont-aux-Rochers, nor that my men, believing me to have purposely betrayed them, shot me for it."

So strong a sensation here went round Court and audience alike that Aymar was obliged to pause. "Good Lord!" thought Laurent to himself, "what a way to open . . . and how like him!"

"But," went on Aymar, standing like a statue, "I emphatically deny the motive assigned to my action. I shall hope to prove to the Court that the disaster was the result, in reality, of a scheme which went wrong, that no treachery was intended for a moment, and that my men acted as they did under a misapprehension."

He began without more ado to read his summary, a short, lucid statement, making no appeal for mercy but laying a certain stress, as it proceeded, on the points which were undoubtedly in his favour. Such were, the important conversation with Saint-Etienne and M. du Parc at Keraven, showing that the whole scheme had been worked out beforehand, and that he could reasonably rely on Saint-Etienne's collaboration; his immediate return to his own men and the frantic haste he made to warn them; and his agreeing to give up his sword and court an enquiry—which, however, the precipitate action of his followers put for the time out of the question.

He then started to take his points in more detail. With regard to the conversation at the *Abeille d'Or*, the General or the Marquis de la Boëssière could bear out his statement that Colonel de Saint-Etienne and his regiment were at Keraven on April 27th. Of what passed at his interview with him, however, he had to acknowledge that he could not produce evidence, since M. de Saint-Etienne was dead, and he had failed to trace M. du Parc. He was perfectly aware how unfortunate this was for his case.

The Court concurred, and found voice in a member who remarked somewhat gratuitously that M. de la Rocheterie had then nothing to prove that the story of his 'plan' was not concocted afterwards.

"That," responded Aymar a trifle dryly, "is exactly the inference which may be drawn. But I can at least prove

that I *had* an interview with those two gentlemen at the *Abeille d'Or* on that date. I will call the innkeeper himself for that purpose."

The questioning of that worthy over, Aymar proceeded with his narrative, and soon came (with what inward shrinking Laurent guessed) to the arrival at Sessignes of the Marquis—he did not name him—with news of grave peril to 'a lady' who had rendered a service to the cause in 1813, and might therefore well stand in danger from the Imperialists now; and how, rejecting his impulse to give himself up in her stead, he decided to offer the Bonapartists his lieutenant's letter in exchange for her—with the fixed intention, however, of carrying out the rest of the plan exactly as sketched at Keraven.

And then, as Laurent anticipated, the questions began.

"Who was the lady, Monsieur?"

"Is it not immaterial what her name was?" asked Aymar.

"No," replied the officer who had put the question, "not if we are to believe that she was in danger because of past services."

"You cannot take my word for those services?"

They shook their heads. Then someone said, "We quite appreciate that you want to keep her name out of this business, Monsieur de la Rocheterie, but we must know what those services were—and we must have some proof that the detained lady was really she who rendered them."

Aymar thereupon detailed Mme de Villecresne's exploit at Chalais, the results of which were highly beneficial to 'a certain leader.' And the Chevalier de Sécillon suddenly declaring that he knew the story, and the name of its heroine, it was finally agreed that if a responsible witness wrote down the name of the lady detained by the Bonapartists and sent it up to the Court, and it proved to be the same, he would have established his point. But what witness could do this?

L'Oiseleur turned and exchanged a look with Colonel Richard, who nodded. So he announced that the witness whom he was about to call in any case would do this for him, since it was he who had had the lady in his hands. And, not a little to the general surprise, Colonel Richard, lately in command of the Imperialist troops at Saint-Goazec, was cited to give evidence for his defeated opponent.

He got up very impassively, writing down the name as he did so. It was passed up, and found satisfactory.

"I will now ask you, Colonel Richard," said Aymar, addressing him, "to tell the story of your receipt of M. de Fresne's letter, in order to show that no more was asked of you than this lady's safety—and that in actual fact even that bargain could not be carried out, because the lady was never really in danger."

At which revelation even members of the Court were observed to hold their heads.

(5)

Laurent began by listening with avidity to the story of the coming of M. de Vaubernier that night to the presbytère of Saint-Goazec with the letter, and his interview with Colonel Richard; but as the latter's evidence went on, he listened with inward maledictions also. How was it possible for anyone to be such a fool as that old gentleman—not only, in a sense, to have originated the whole situation in his turnip of a brain, but also to have played, in such a preposterous manner, right into the hands of this intelligent colonel of engineers by revealing that the enemy proposed a bargain with him before finding out whether a bargain were called for at all! How could he not have seen from Colonel Richard's manner that night that there was no question of shooting anybody—even though the Imperialist had, as now appeared, been too astute to display his entire ignorance of the lady's presence at the inn! Laurent's disgust got the better of his interest.

He heard, however, at one point, questions eliciting exactly what was in the letter, and also a sharp query as to why it had not been laid before the Court, to which Aymar briefly replied that it had subsequently been destroyed by a third person. He heard, too, the Imperialist being asked what his thoughts were at the moment of the letter's reception, and his frank response, that as it appeared to be genuine he was driven to one of two suppositions: either that L'Oiseleur was a traitor, and was deliberately selling his men for the safety of a woman whom he believed to be in mortal peril, or that the whole thing was a trap. He therefore went over to the *Cheval Blanc* to find out what possible grounds L'Oiseleur could have for believing the lady to be in such a situation, and got on the track of the truth, though he did not run the culprit to ground till after the fight.

"And what was the truth, Colonel?" asked a voice as he paused.

Laurent put his hands over his ears. But he heard—or seemed to hear—all the same. . . . He certainly heard the sonorous voice of the Chevalier de Margadel exclaiming, with astonishment, “Then do you mean to tell us that the whole question of the lady’s danger, and all that hung on it, rested on no more solid basis than a practical joke?”

“I am ashamed to say that it is so,” replied Colonel Richard.

Aymar, sitting at his table, had his head on his hand. Laurent knew how bitter this must taste—how the shadow of ridicule, hardest of all to face, must seem to be hovering near him, though really it was engulfed in the shadow of tragedy. None of the Court, at least, appeared to find this revelation amusing, and Laurent was grateful to them. He was not so sure about one or two of the younger officers in the audience. As he scanned in particular one whose demeanour did not please him, he heard Colonel Richard resuming his evidence, and saying how he considered the letter worth acting on—with precautions, as he thought that a leader with the experience and antecedents of M. de la Rocheterie had probably taken steps to nullify the information he had sent; nor, as between one soldier and another, did he consider that unfair . . . merely a move in the game. “So I took every precaution that I could think of,” he concluded, “and the result you know; but I desire, gentlemen, to make it very plain that if Colonel de Saint-Étienne’s regiment had not been ordered away from Keraven when it was, I, not knowing at the moment of his presence in the neighbourhood, might well have been the victim of disaster instead of M. de la Rocheterie.”

Laurent could see that this testimony had made rather a strong impression. The Court conferred together. Then the Marquis de la Boëssière observed, “In fact, you are convinced that M. de la Rocheterie is speaking the truth?”

“I am absolutely. I should hardly have agreed to come and give evidence at the request of a former adversary if I thought him a traitor. Perhaps,” said Colonel Richard, drawing himself up a little, “I may be allowed to say that I think too much of my own reputation for that.”

He returned to his place, and Aymar stood up again.

“It seems pretty well proved, Monsieur de la Rocheterie,” said M. de la Boëssière, looking at his notes, “that you had sufficient grounds for thinking the lady to be in danger, but do you consider that you were justified in taking such a

risk for the sake of any individual, of whatever sex or services?"

"But I have already stated, *mon Général*," replied Aymar steadily, "for what reasons I considered that there was practically no risk." And he rehearsed them once more.

"You had then no scruples about sending the letter?"

"I had scruples because I disliked the whole idea—but not on the score of risk."

"Your perceptions must have been singularly clouded at the time, *Monsieur de la Rocheterie*," observed a dry voice. "The risk appears, to me at any rate, to have been more than obvious!"

The shaft drew blood; Laurent saw it. Whose perceptions would not have been clouded at that dizzy moment in the orchard, the meeting-place of rapture and despair? But after a second Aymar recovered himself and said gravely, "I am not speaking of how it appears to me now, *Monsieur*, but giving evidence as to how it appeared to me then."

"I think we should remember," said the General-in-Chief, suddenly interposing, "that *M. de la Rocheterie*'s whole military career has been one of taking risks, and very successful ones, and that familiarity is apt to breed contempt."

Someone here observed that it would certainly be very hard too, for a gentleman to leave a lady in such a situation, particularly when he had the means of saving her to his hand.

"Or a man either, if it comes to that," murmured a voice.

And on this *M. de Sécillon*, who knew the identity of the lady, remarked, presumably with the idea of giving Aymar some support, "Moreover, as it was for *M. de la Rocheterie* himself that the lady had obtained that military information, it is easy to understand that he felt under a special obligation to her."

("Oh, you fool!" said Laurent to himself.)

The Marquis de la Boëssière looked at the speaker. "Oh, *M. de la Rocheterie* himself was the leader in question, was he? Then she was personally known to him? Is that so, *Monsieur de la Rocheterie*? I do not think we had gathered that."

Laurent would not even look at his friend's back here; he looked (against his will) at the deeply interested audience.

"Yes," said Aymar briefly.

"How well? You must pardon the question."

A tiny pause. "She was my cousin."

"Ah, I see," said *M. de la Boëssière*. He might not have

meant his tone to sound significant; it could hardly avoid doing so. Among the audience there was an undoubted and rather pleasurable stir, and on the face which Laurent had already singled out for dislike a grin which made the young man clench his hands.

However, the Court intimated that Aymar should proceed with his narrative. He did so. He recalled the innkeeper to prove that he arrived at three in the morning at Keraven, was greatly distressed at finding the troops gone, and set off at once on a fresh horse. And he had carried his recital as far as the Bois des Fauvettes when an objection occurred from the dark, thin-faced officer who had made the observation about 'clouded perceptions.' This individual suggested that L'Oiseleur should produce some witness to prove that he really did his best after he left Keraven to arrive in time to prevent a disaster. "Otherwise," he observed, "you might have planned to arrive too late."

"Oh, bosh!" cried Laurent internally, now fixing this objector with a hostile eye.

Aymar replied that he could hardly prove that; the only witness to his haste (failing the dead body of the horse which he had killed by it, and the quarryman whom he had intimidated into selling him another) would again be the innkeeper, to whom he had paid the value of the first. "But," he added, "if I had really intended to be too late, should I have rejoined my men at all the same morning?"

"That ought to settle him," thought Laurent. But instead he found that this keen-witted person was landing his friend in a new and unforeseen difficulty, for, having elicited that de Fresne, the next witness, had not appeared in the Bois des Fauvettes till the afternoon of Monday, May 1st, he pointed out that there was no evidence to show that he *did* rejoin his force the same morning.

For a moment Aymar seemed taken aback. Then he rallied. "I can produce it indirectly, Monsieur," he returned. "If M. du Tremblay will be so obliging, he can tell you that I despatched one of my officers to him early on the morning of April 29th to warn him that I could not now co-operate with him. This officer, M. de Soulanges, no doubt gave him an account of my return; even if he did not, his mission itself was a proof of it." He looked towards his one-time ally

Now M. du Tremblay was sitting at the extreme left-hand of the table, and round the corner of it. He was not, therefore,

directly facing Aymar, like the majority of the Court; and all along, it seemed to Laurent, he had taken the advantage of his position not to look at him. All through the business about the 'lady,' of whose identity and antecedents he certainly knew as much as M. de Sécillon, he had never given a sign. And when he addressed the President now his tone was curt.

"I can perfectly well corroborate that," he said. And indeed he went on to relate how M. de Soulanges had given him a circumstantial account of L'Oiseleur's return, in haste and fatigue, just after the disaster.

Laurent was puzzled by his manner, but it dawned upon him that he was probably deeply distressed at seeing L'Oiseleur at the bar before him. At least, this seemed likely from his next words. "May I take this opportunity of pointing out to the Court," he went on, "though it is not exactly the question at issue now, that a traitor would never have sent that message? He would, on the contrary, have seized the opportunity of letting me blunder into disaster too, by keeping silence. Through M. de la Rocheterie's timely warning I was able to alter my plans a little, and, as you know, I was fortunate enough to bring off one of the successes of the campaign. Further, if M. de la Rocheterie had had treacherous intentions he would undoubtedly have made use of the intimate knowledge of our joint plans which he possessed—and this, it is clear, he did not do." (*No, he most certainly did not!* observed Laurent sotto voce.)

A murmur, almost of applause, went round. Aymar thanked the speaker and resumed his narrative, carrying it up to the unexpected arrival of de Fresne in the wood, at which point he called M. de Fresne himself.

"Please tell the Court, Monsieur de Fresne," he said, turning to him, "how you knew of the step I had taken, and how you represented to me the only way out."

So Nicolas de Fresne, standing at the witness-table with an expression of concentrated distaste about his whole person, cleared his throat and began abruptly:

"I was taken prisoner at the bridge—knocked on the head. When I was sufficiently recovered Colonel Richard sent for me—it was at Saint-Goazec—showed me my own letter to M. de la Rocheterie, and told me how it had come into his hands. Being rather . . . startled, I asked him to let me have it back, and I had it on me when I escaped during the night of April 30th. When I reached the——"

M. de la Boëssière leant forward. "One moment, please. We must go back a little. Colonel Richard presumably told you that M. de la Rocheterie had himself sent your letter to him. Did you immediately believe that?"

"No, certainly not," responded de Fresne.

"But he succeeded in convincing you?"

"No, I was not convinced."

"But you were shaken?"

"Yes," muttered the witness.

"Why?"

De Fresne did not answer for a moment. Then he said slowly, "Because M. de la Rocheterie had written something on the letter, and I knew his hand."

"What was it?"

Since his lieutenant seemed to find a difficulty in replying, Aymar hereupon got up himself and said rather dryly, "M. de Fresne had written part of his letter in cipher, so I deciphered that portion before sending it. It was of no use trying to drive a bargain with the letter at all unless the information it contained was quite clear." As he sat down again Laurent reflected, "Of course that is perfectly logical, but it does not sound well, and de Fresne has not done any good by being unable to get it out; it merely puts the dot on the i." Indeed the raising of eyebrows and compressing of lips in the Court showed that he was right.

De Fresne, however, was allowed to resume, and related how, returning, he asked his leader for an explanation, and how the latter told him that he had sent the letter as a ruse, but that the scheme had miscarried, and how.

"And what did you think of this explanation?" asked M. de la Boëssière.

"I must admit that I found it inadequate."

"And yet M. de la Rocheterie has been at such pains to prove that the plan was so complete and void of risk that he very nearly carried it out with no other motive than a desire to trap the Bonapartists!"

De Fresne shifted uneasily.

"Why did you not accept this explanation?"

"It was after the disaster had occurred, and the risk then, naturally, seemed indefensible."

The unknown dark officer whom Laurent had already christened 'Fouquier-Tinville' leant forward.

"Your two replies do not tally, Monsieur de Fresne. If you found the explanation inadequate, as you admit, it must

be that you had some other reason than that you considered the risk indefensible. The latter would be merely a case of condemning your leader's judgment. Which reply are we to accept?"

"I suppose," replied de Fresne reluctantly, "I must say that I considered the explanation inadequate."

"And why?"

A slight pause. "Because I knew from what Colonel Richard had said that there was a bargain of some sort."

"And had not M. de la Rocheterie told you that?"

"No."

"Did you ask him anything about it, as you knew of its existence?"

"Yes. And he admitted it. But he would not tell me what it was."

"The inference being," remarked 'Fouquier-Tinville,' "that he was ashamed of it."

"I . . . I did not know what to think," admitted de Fresne unhappily.

M. de Margadel here said in his great voice, "Why on earth should he not have told you what the bargain was, if there was nothing to be ashamed of?"

"Because," said Aymar, suddenly rising to his feet, "seeing what had happened, I was ashamed of it."

There was a sensation. A large, stout, heavy-faced officer at the end of the table said, in an annoyed voice, "I should like to know at this point what M. de la Rocheterie is driving at? His witnesses seem to do nothing but bring out damaging admissions, and then he makes them himself, gratuitously." And his mumble to himself of "There's something behind all this!" was distinctly audible.

Aymar was rather stung; Laurent could see it from the poise of his head. "My object, Monsieur," he retorted, "is merely to tell the exact truth, in the hope of clearing myself; I have no other aim."

Once more de Fresne was requested to proceed. This time he got almost without interruption to the crisis, which he managed to represent as a few of the men, leaving the wood in panic, shooting at and wounding their leader, on whom they had previously laid hands. But at that point he was not unnaturally questioned.

"You could not stop all this insubordination?"

"I did my best, but since M. de la Rocheterie himself could not control the men——"

"What was M. de la Rocheterie doing all this time then?"

"I told you," answered de Fresne hurriedly. "They had disarmed him, and were holding him. He could do nothing."

"Then when the alarm came they let him go?"

"N . . . no."

"But they could hardly have shot him while some of their accomplices were holding him."

De Fresne looked at the floor. "By that time they had tied him to a tree."

It was out at last, pronounced in words . . . and caused a silence—but hardly a merciful one. And the eyes, the eyes on Aymar! If Laurent could only have shielded him from them. . . . The questioner's voice took up again:

"And he was found like that by the Imperialists?"

"Yes," answered de Fresne sullenly. "It could not be helped."

Aymar, horribly pale, got up, as if he feared his subordinate was going to be blamed, and corroborated this, adding that M. de Fresne did his best to free him. He sat down again in the same tingling silence.

It was the stout officer who broke it. "Did M. de la Rocheterie," he asked, addressing the witness, "let his men proceed to such an extremity without any attempt to defend himself? It looks as if his followers were so convinced of something against him that no explanations of his were of any avail. Surely the Chouan, of whom we all have experience, will accept anything so long as his faith in a leader is unshaken?"

But to this de Fresne replied that their faith *was* badly shaken, both by the disaster and the loss of the *jartier*, and that in addition Le Bihan, the ringleader, was nursing a grudge.

Now came endless questions about the *jartier*, how, when and why lost, and then about Magloire, through all which Laurent's heart was slowly descending to the region of the floor, reaching it completely when the theory was finally evolved between 'Fouquier-Tinville,' the stout officer and one other, that something pointing to deliberate treachery must have come out in the unaccounted-for three days, between Aymar's return and de Fresne's escape. And why had M. de la Rocheterie brought no evidence to cover those three days? Was he refraining from producing the only

people who could tell why they did shoot him? Aymar, whose voice, to Laurent's ear, was beginning to show the first signs of the strain on him, admitted that he had not thought of it, considering that the testimony of M. de Fresne, who had been present throughout the episode, was sufficient to show on what grounds his men had turned against him.

And then the stout officer said, "We must hear something more about this shooting itself, and how deliberate it was. That is very important. Was it as hurried and casual as you seem to imply, Monsieur de Fresne? It can hardly have been if M. de la Rocheterie was *tied to a tree!* . . . Did they proceed to do that only just before they shot him?"

"No, not exactly," admitted de Fresne unwillingly.

"How long before, then?"

"It must have been . . . between half an hour and three-quarters."

"And in all that time nobody protested?"

"Yes, a good many, but they were not so strong as the other party."

"And did not M. de la Rocheterie himself protest?"

"Once; but when Le Bihan gave him the opportunity of justifying himself he refused to say a word—as I should have done in his place."

"Then they never got the explanation, such as it was?"

"Yes; I gave it them myself in the hope of saving him."

"Without the 'bargain'?"

"Naturally, since I did not know what it was."

"And the 'explanation' was still, presumably, unconvincing to you when you gave it?"

"I was beginning to waver."

"So you were able to tell them that it had convinced you?"

"I could not quite say that."

"How many men precisely took part in shooting M. de la Rocheterie—how many shots were fired?"

De Fresne looked harassed. Once more Aymar came to his assistance.

"As M. de Fresne was trying at considerable risk to cut me free, and had also to rally the men against the Bonapartists, he can hardly have been engaged in computation. I can satisfy the Court, up to a point. I was fired at twice by Le Bihan; his first shot struck me, the second missed; and by another man, who also hit me . . . and by at least one more, as I afterwards discovered. That makes a minimum of three

men and four shots; there may have been more. I do not know, because I lost consciousness after the second. But I imagine that they had not much more leisure." He sat down again; it was beyond Laurent how he could have steeled himself to get up.

Sol de Grisolles, intervening here, observed, "Well, I think we can now leave this part of the subject. It is obvious that hasty shots by three or four men cannot be said to constitute an execution."

But the stout officer said stubbornly, "Yes, General, but if he was fastened to a tree the intention at least of an execution seems obvious; and since it was nothing short of murder of a commanding officer, I cannot believe that even irregular troops would be guilty of such an unprecedented act without more reason than the showing of this letter.—And, by the way, who destroyed that letter, and why?"

"I destroyed it," replied de Fresne briefly. "And I did so because I believed M. de la Rocheterie to have died in the hands of the enemy, and I saw no purpose to be served by keeping a piece of evidence which he was not alive to refute."

"In fact," put in 'Fouquier-Tinville,' "you tried to hush up the whole matter! Was it for the same reason that you never attempted to have any of these men brought to justice? Did you continue to command them, by the way? What happened to them?"

De Fresne told him.

"Then you took no steps to have even Le Bihan brought to trial—you preferred the matter to go by default, even when these rumours began to get about, rather than give the men a chance of stating their case. In fact you acted then just as M. de la Rocheterie is acting now—either from design or carelessness keeping out the men's evidence."

"I protest against that inference," said de Fresne angrily, "both for myself and M. de la Rocheterie. Monsieur le Président——"

"Yes, I think it is quite unfounded." Sol de Grisolles looked at 'Fouquier-Tinville.'

"Then I withdraw it," said the latter. "But I do submit that, either in those three days in the wood, or in the destroyed letter, there was some more damning proof of treachery than appears."

Aymar was on his feet in an instant. "Will you stand down, Monsieur de Fresne? I call Colonel Richard as a witness that there was nothing extraneous in the letter

but my deciphering of a portion of it and his subsequent endorsement."

"There was nothing more—not a syllable," said the Imperialist.

"Then it was the unaccounted-for three days," pronounced the stout officer.

Aymar drew himself up. His temper was roused, but no one save Laurent would have known it. "I can only assure the Court once more," he said, "that nothing was farther from my thoughts than to keep back any evidence. But the Court must admit that I could hardly have induced any of the men who shot me to come willingly before this tribunal and confess to what has already been qualified as murder . . . whether justifiable or no."

The President nodded, as if in appreciation of this point, and the Marquis de la Boëssière, addressing him, remarked, "It scarcely seems to me, Monsieur le Président, that we need distress ourselves over the supposition that adverse evidence is being suppressed. What is far more serious, in my view, is of quite an opposite nature—M. de la Rocheterie's entire failure to bring conclusive testimony to support his main contention. We may believe that he is speaking the truth when he says that he acted in good faith—but not because he has *proved* that he did. If I may put it rather harshly, there has not this afternoon been one shred of real evidence to prove that he did not deliberately sacrifice his troops to save his cousin."

If Aymar did not flush, Laurent did; he almost ground his teeth.

"I think, Monsieur de la Boëssière," said the President, "that that undoubtedly *is* to put it rather harshly. We must hope that M. de la Rocheterie can bring some more convincing testimony on that point to-morrow, since I think we must now adjourn for to-day."

(6)

All the way back to Aymar's lodging those words were vibrating through Laurent's whole being: "not a shred of real evidence to show that he did not deliberately sacrifice his men to save his cousin." Yet when they got into the little room, and de Fresne, who had accompanied them, revealed the depth of his gloom and of his irritation, Laurent, from pure antagonism, began to cheer up.

"I told you so!" lamented the poor gentleman. "I told you from the beginning, La Rocheterie, that it was a mistake to court enquiry now . . . and after failing to produce your two chief witnesses still more so! And what is going to happen to-morrow? We have no more evidence; the thing will become a farce!"

"I will tell you what will happen to-morrow, Monsieur," remarked Laurent rather maliciously. "You will go on giving your testimony, perhaps for hours, with that fat old fellow asking question after question about those three days in the Bois des Fauvettes which intrigue him so—the Three Days of Creation."

Aymar, who looked like a ghost, smiled in spite of himself. "That event occupied six, you will remember, Laurent." And the unfortunate de Fresne said tartly that, with such a prospect in front of him, he would betake himself to his inn and go to bed early.

As he closed the door behind his lieutenant Aymar shook his head at the tormentor.

"You are really rather unkind, Laurent!" And, as Laurent made a grimace intended to show at once a sense of self-justification and a measure of penitence, he went on gravely, "And you know, mon ami, de Fresne is quite justified in his view. I have not really any chance now . . . of being cleared, that is. Indeed, I was very strongly tempted to tell the General at the close of to-day's proceedings that it was hardly worth while wasting the time of the Court any more. But then it came to me that perhaps it was cowardly, and perhaps it was rash . . . and I have had enough of being both."

"The first you have never been!" retorted Laurent. "Moreover, I feel that the luck will turn yet. Remember that you have the *jartier* back! Now, you are tired to death; lie down on this horrible sofa and try to rest a little. No, you do not need to go through those notes any more."

"That is true," agreed Aymar as he obeyed him. "There is nothing more to say now." And as Laurent spread a covering over him he added, with a smile, "But I did not mean you to come here to begin Arbelles over again!"

"What did you mean me to come for, then, since you will not let me give evidence now that I am here?"

Aymar made no reply in words; he merely pressed his hand. And a few minutes later, sheer fatigue overriding the nervous tension, he was sleeping like a child. But, in

spite of his own brave words, Laurent's heart ached as he sat beside him and thought of the morrow. . . . And to-day? In some ways Aymar had got through better than he probably looked for—in the matter of keeping out Mme de Villecresne's name, for instance. On the other hand they had neither of them anticipated that the Court would want to burrow so deeply into that intensely painful episode of the shooting. Oh, what would be the outcome of the whole business—what, indeed, would an impartial observer have said was the real outcome of to-day's proceedings?

But in Mme Leblanc's little sitting-room no such person existed; there was only one very anxious young man watching another.

More than half an hour had passed thus when there came a knock at the door, and Laurent, tiptoeing over, was presented by Mme Leblanc with a large visiting-card, and the information that there was 'a gentleman downstairs asking to see M. de la Rocheterie.'

Laurent gave an exclamation. "What is it?" asked Aymar, rousing.

"You would never guess!" cried Laurent in high glee. "Our dear Père Perrelet, come, I am sure, to make amends, though dropped from Heaven knows where, and on your track Heaven knows how! You'll see him, Aymar, of course?"

And, pelting down the narrow stairs, he almost fell into the arms of M. le docteur J.-M.-P. Perrelet, in all his Sunday clothes, at the bottom. Indeed M. le docteur soundly embraced him.

"Oh, my dear boy, how is he after this morning? I was there—you didn't see me? I managed to get in—I—as a military doctor! I heard of this by chance at Arbelles two days ago . . . so I knew that I should find him here. And now I've listened to it all . . . mon Dieu, what a story! What a brute and fool I was! Will he see me? I want to ask his pardon. Do you think he will give it me? Or perhaps he never realised that——"

"Oh, did he not!" returned Laurent. "But he owes you far too much to refuse it . . . and in any case . . . Go up; there's the door."

And he watched the little doctor mount the stairs, already taking out his pocket-handkerchief, heard him open the door and say in husky tones, "My dearest boy, can you ever——" Then the door shut.

"Well," thought the young man, leaning against the foot

of the stairs and feeling a kind of pleasant moisture about his own eyelids, "at least *I* have never claimed not to be a sentimentalist. How long shall I give them?"

M. Perrelet stayed to supper, which his presence somehow enlivened into quite a cheerful meal. He was very hopeful, on what grounds could hardly be discovered. I wonder, thought Laurent once more, that he doesn't say, 'I'm no optimist,' and shortly afterwards, to his delight, the old surgeon did remark, "Of course I'm not one to take an unduly rosy view of things!" And Laurent himself again besought Aymar to call him as a witness, and when Aymar enquired 'as a witness to what?' asseverated anew that he should not be contented till du Tremblay knew what he owed him over the cipher business—till they all knew it.

"My dear Laurent," observed L'Oiseleur a little dryly, "you surely do not expect me to bring it forward as a merit that I did not betray a comrade's plans when it was suggested to me to do so!"

"Of course you would never have done it voluntarily! But I wonder how many people, in your condition, could to the very last have kept their heads sufficiently not to show so much as assent or dissent when that blackguard narrowed the issue down to a single question—that vital question of the crossing of the river?"

"Nobody who had not a will of steel," pronounced M. Perrelet.

"There you are!" cried Laurent. "There is evidence—indirect, if you like—as to intention and character. Oh, I could make it very plain to those gentlemen if I had the chance!"

Aymar shrugged his shoulders. "I am afraid your desire will not be gratified, mon cher; and I am afraid that I don't want it gratified, so publicly."

"It's a great waste," sighed the champion stubbornly. "And it is of no good to depreciate testimony of that kind, because you see that it is 'without a shred of real evidence,' as M. de la Boëssière would say, that you have converted"—he grinned—"a hard-headed, unemotional scientific man like M. Perrelet from his temporary unbelief!"

(7)

The scientific man in question becoming very high-handed after supper, and ordering his ex-patient to bed, Laurent

went forth to hunt up a couple of acquaintances whom he had seen as they came back from the Hôtel de ville. He found them, as he expected, at the Hôtel de l'Ecusson and, knowing Aymar to be in excellent hands, went in with them and called for wine.

In the room he entered, which was full of officers, the enquiry seemed to be the sole topic of conversation, and the only point on which there appeared to be general agreement was that those who had not attended it that afternoon would be there next morning. Some stared at Laurent, recognising him, and he felt that it was not a bad move to have put in an appearance, just to show that one had a clear conscience. His own friends were fortunately *bien pensants*, one of them enthusiastically so, and the other said that he thought La Rocheterie must be innocent, or he would never have had the courage to bring all this upon himself. With them, too, surmises were not wanting as to the 'cousin' and her relations with L'Oiseleur, but Laurent purposely avoided throwing any light upon the subject.

Presently, lo, through the clouds of tobacco-smoke a face appeared for a moment and vanished again. Laurent made one of his swift sallies.

"Monsieur Perrelet, come in, come in! Are you looking for me—how charming of you! Come and have a glass of wine with me! I have some friends here; you can tell us the latest news from Arbelles."

M. Perrelet, chuckling, protesting and pleased, suffered the young man to drag him in and make presentations.

"Well, yes, perhaps one glass of cognac," he said. "I left him in bed," he announced behind his hand to Laurent, "in fact I gave him a sleeping-draught (though he was not aware of it). . . . There is something I want to ask you presently. . . . Oh, thank you, Monsieur, you are too kind!"

So there the good doctor sat, smoking a cheroot, and very happy in the consciousness that he was 'seeing life'—in the Royalist camp this time; at least that was how Laurent read his amused and contented and observant expression, and he was probably not far wrong. But half of Laurent himself, though he continued to chat, was gauging with a rather too acute sensitiveness the current of feeling in the room about the one thing which mattered to him. After the tension of the afternoon the wine he had taken, though without affecting his head in the ordinary sense, made him conscious of a desire to get up and say something, publicly, on

Aymar's behalf. But his better sense warned him against it. However, he ended by engaging in something a great deal more sensational than oratory.

For at a table close by had now been sitting for a little while, with a friend, the very officer whose behaviour had displeased him in the audience at the Hôtel de ville. Laurent could not help hearing their conversation. The two amused themselves for some time by half-whispered witticisms about 'la belle cousine,' and though Laurent's brow grew darker and darker his good sense again warned him not to bring this topic into more prominence by taking notice of it.

But suddenly he heard, so clearly spoken that others must have heard it, too:

"Pretty brazen, to base your main defence on an invented conversation with two men of whom one is dead and the other cannot be found!"

The other man assented, and Laurent, angry as he was, realised what a specious appearance of truth there was in this criticism.

"Yet," went on the voice of his *bête noire*, "in spite of the fact that he has not, as La Boëssière said, a shred of real evidence to bring forward, I am afraid that he will never get what he deserves now."

"No," responded the other. "It is curious, the impression he seems to have made on some of the Court."

"Cannot you see that it is this pose of complete honesty and telling the whole truth that is doing it! It was an idea little short of genius. Of course one must be a good actor to carry it out . . . but that is just what the man is!"

"—Whatever is the matter, my dear boy?" exclaimed M. Perrelet. The dear boy did move sometimes with such disconcerting suddenness.

As for the individual who had so appraised L'Oiseleur's histrionic abilities, he had now in front of him, to his exceeding surprise, a fair young man in the Vendean uniform, who was saying, with a very deadly intensity, "You will kindly take back every word of what you have just said, Monsieur, and apologise for having said it!"

"What! I'll be damned if I will!" cried the critic, jumping to his feet. So Laurent, exclaiming, "*Espèce de Guitton!*" knocked him down.

"Aha, la boxe Anglaise!" said M. Perrelet, craning forward, like everyone else. But the combat was not destined to proceed on pugilistic lines. Amid terrific clamour the

victim rose to his feet, tugging at his sword, while some threw themselves on him, and Laurent's two friends tried to drag him away. M. de Courtomer himself appeared quite calm, though he was really tingling with the liveliest wrath.

"Satisfaction? Certainly!" M. Perrelet heard him say, amid the babel. "Also, instantly. Montbrillais, you'll see fair play for me, won't you?"

"But you can't fight here!" several voices assured him, and his friends too spoke of next morning.

"I regret that I am engaged to-morrow morning," quoth Laurent, and proceeded to remove his sword-belt. "Lucky I had my sword on this time!" he told himself.

"Engaged? Ah yes, with the play-actor!" sneered his opponent, whose lip was already swelling.

"No," retorted Laurent, throwing back his head and speaking very clearly and deliberately, "with my friend, M. le Vicomte de la Rocheterie, Chevalier de St. Louis—he who held the Moulin Brûlé, L'Oiseleur!"

"Bravo!" cried several voices to this.

"And I will either give you satisfaction here and now or not at all," resumed Laurent. "You need have no fear on the score of the medical attendance; I have an excellent surgeon with me"—he slightly indicated M. Perrelet—"and though he too happens to be a friend of M. de la Rocheterie's, I am sure he will do his best for you."

There were not only cheers, but laughter now. The general opinion also was with Laurent on the desirability of settling the affair on the spot, and his foe was too angry to wish to postpone shedding his blood. So the company pushed back the tables with alacrity, and Laurent stripped off his coat and gave it to one of his friends. At that point M. Perrelet came and caught him by the arm.

"Laurent," he said in a low voice, agitated and yet pleasurably agitated, and unaware that he had used his Christian name, "Laurent, my dear boy, are you au fait at this sort of thing?"

"Do you mean," enquired Laurent coolly, as he rolled up his shirt-sleeve, "have I ever fought before? No, I have not. But, between foils and singlestick, I know quite enough to settle M. Guitton cadet."

M. Perrelet could not restrain a chuckle of appreciation. But he whispered, "Do, pray, be careful!"

"Of him? Oh yes . . . up to a point."

How all too short are moments of ecstasy! This one only lasted, from the—"On guard!" and the loosing of the crossed blades, fifty-six seconds exactly—seconds in which the younger gentleman at the end of one of those blades was blissfully, unimaginably happy. He knew that he was no brilliant swordsman, but he knew too that he had a steady hand, a quick eye, and a very good balance . . . and he was fighting for Aymar. Yes, it was a pity that this man, ten years his senior and with more experience, no doubt, behind him, was so angry, because otherwise he might have prolonged the bout instead of exposing himself in that crazy fashion. . . .

A queer sensation, that of the point going in! Queer, evidently for Guitton cadet also. There was surprise on his face as well as pain and fury as he recoiled, run very creditably through the top of the right shoulder.

(8)

About a quarter of an hour afterwards Laurent found himself arm-in-arm under the stars with M. Perrelet, his purpose being to escort that excellent gentleman back to his inn. Prudence had dictated to all in the coffee-room of the Hôtel de l'Ecusson who were amenable to military discipline a quiet and speedy dispersal, and Laurent himself had only waited till M. Perrelet had finished with his victim. The wound was not dangerous, but it was painful; on hearing which its author had expressed the most unchivalrous gratification.

The couple were now in unfeelingly good spirits as they picked their way in the darkness over gutters.

"I wish I could scold you as you deserve to be scolded, mauvais sujet!" said M. Perrelet, pressing the arm under his. "But I am incapable of it. And it was so neat—so clever, even, considering that you can know nothing of anatomy! . . . And your success, your championship of La Rocheterie, had an extraordinary effect—I felt it."

"Do you really think so?" asked Laurent, soaring into a still higher heaven.

"I am sure of it. It was almost a pity that none of the——"

"That none of the Nine Muses were there," finished the young man laughing. "Yes, that is my pretty name for the

gentlemen of the Court of Enquiry. But on the whole, it's a good thing they were not.—By the way, Monsieur Perrelet, did you ever get that letter I wrote you?"

M. Perrelet stopped on the brink of a dark streamlet. "I did, my child, and thankful I was to get it, though it made me more than ever distressed and ashamed about that incident at La Baussaine. But what he said that night was really most damning. (No, I shall not tell you what it was.) Still, I shall never forgive myself for acting as I did. . . . And how much more trying that shooting business, too, must have been for the poor boy than I realised."

"Yes," said Laurent rather sadly, "and the worst of it is, that to have gone through all that suffering and shame only leaves him in a more critical position than he was before. You heard this afternoon how it was cast up against him, and to what cruel allegations it led. As for to-morrow——"

"Oh, to-morrow will be all right, you will see," announced M. Perrelet, resuming his advance. "—If he can hold out till the end that is. He is not really in the least fit for this affair, of course.—Ah, this was what I wanted to ask you—round this corner is my way—what in the name of fortune made those marks on his arm which he tried, too late, to conceal from me when I was examining him after you left? They are burns, and he says he did them himself, by accident—and expects me, a doctor, to believe him!"

This time it was Laurent who stopped, and under a convenient street lamp. "Ah, he said that, did he? Of course he would! Accident, indeed!" He made one of his hot, boyish gestures. "It was the most deliberate, cold-blooded——"

He never reached his noun. A gesture was made behind him; a hand fell on his shoulder. "I regret to have to demand your sword, Monsieur," said an abrupt military voice. "You are placed under arrest. Kindly follow me at once!"

It is hard to know which of the couple was the more thunderstruck. Words were completely smitten from both of them. On the very threshold of his thrilling revelation Laurent was plucked away, vanishing like a dream from the eyes of M. Perrelet, who, a moment later, was left, a stout and bewildered little civilian, in the light of the convenient street lamp, while the footsteps of the patrol and the captured duellist died away round the corner. Elijah and Elisha had not a more dramatic parting.

The threads of events lay thereafter in M. Perrelet's hands. After a short period of dismayed reflection, he hurried back to Aymar's lodging. But that young man lay relaxed in the profound and beneficent slumber of his physician's own procuring, and it would have been a crime to wake him. So, except that the hazard of sleep afforded M. Perrelet an uninterrupted view of the branded arm, he gained little by his visit, and hastened off to M. de Fresne, conceiving that there was nothing criminal in waking him with the news.

M. de Fresne was hardly of that opinion. By the time his nocturnal caller had introduced himself and explained his errand he was, and perhaps justifiably, in a thoroughly bad temper. "Poor boy, indeed! Feather-brained young scamp! Let him cool his heels—it won't hurt him. And I can do nothing; the only possible course is for La Rocheterie, if he can, to get permission in the morning for him to attend the Court under open arrest, as a witness. A nice witness for a case where already the testimony is so short of the mark!"

M. Perrelet shook his head at the irate gentleman sitting up in his bed. "*I* consider that he acted very properly, Monsieur. And, as for being feather-brained, let me tell you, in all seriousness, that but for him there would be no La Rocheterie here to-day at all!"

"Humph!" said M. de Fresne, and lying down, turned over on his other side. "Well, I will come and see La Rocheterie about it at half-past six. Good-night."

A little before that hour, therefore, M. Perrelet was on foot once more, and, having obtained admission, peeped in on his patient.

The russet head moved at once on the pillow. "You are up early, Monsieur Perrelet!"

"Have you slept, my dear boy?" enquired the doctor, coming in.

"I have not had a night like this," replied Aymar, "for weeks! It is fortunate . . . but mysterious! . . . Why, is that de Fresne up early too?"

M. Perrelet glanced behind him. "M. de Fresne wants you to write a letter for him to take to the General," he observed casually. "Just a line to request formally that one of your witnesses may be released from arrest in order to attend the Court this morning."

"One of my witnesses arrested!" exclaimed Aymar, raising himself on an elbow. "You don't mean to say that they have

arrested Colonel Richard!—his coming here was all arranged with the General-in-Chief."

"No, not Richard, I am glad to say," replied his lieutenant. "But your friend, M. de Courtomer, made the devil of a disturbance in my hotel last night, and he is now in custody."

"Laurent—Laurent made a disturbance!"

"I should rather say—and *I* was present," put in M. Perrelet, "that he made an impression, and a very gallant one. But as he also made an incision in a member of the party——"

"You mean he fought someone!" exclaimed Aymar, starting up in bed. "And in my quarrel—I can guess it! My God, he's not hurt—don't tell me he is hurt!" he cried, clutching hold of M. Perrelet.

"No, my dear boy, he is not—he has not a scratch. It is the other who is hors de combat, and he is not seriously damaged either. But Laurent is laid by the heels—I do not even know where, it happened so suddenly . . . in the street as we were coming home."

De Fresne meanwhile had got paper and ink and brought them to the bedside. "Why did you not wake me last night?" cried Aymar, seizing him. "He has been a whole night, then, under arrest—in discomfort and anxiety."

(9)

Laurent indeed had been in both, to a high degree, in the cell of the disused convent to which he had been conducted. The discomfort, the fact of arrest itself, would have been light payment for his 'moment exquis' . . . in other circumstances. But in these his loss of liberty was calamitous. His evidence (that precious evidence, to the hope of giving which he still clung) his presence itself in the Court next morning at the verdict, all hung by a hair. He tried to bribe the sentries, he cast wildly about for means of escape . . . till it came to him crushingly that even if he did escape he could not present himself in Court without being instantly rearrested—and damaging Aymar. It was, therefore, to a very subdued and uneffervescent young man that it was announced, about eight in the morning, that he could regard himself as under open arrest for the day in order to attend the Court of Enquiry.

He walked out, dazed but thankful, to find M. de Fresne waiting for him in the street.

"I owe this to you, then, Monsieur!" he exclaimed gratefully. "How good of you! You cannot realise what it means to me!"

"You owe it to M. de la Rocheterie," responded de Fresne with no grace of manner. "He had to be roused from sleep early this morning to request your release. I could not have done anything." (Nor, his tone added, should I have done anything if I could.)

Laurent hung his head.

"Well," continued de Fresne, surveying him, "if you are going into Court you had better come back with me to my hotel and make yourself a little more presentable."

"I can go to my room at Mme Leblanc's," said Laurent meekly. "I suppose I do look rather disreputable," he added, trying to laugh, as they turned together along the street.

But as they walked de Fresne was sufficiently human and unwise to try to improve the occasion a little further. "I cannot help wondering, Monsieur de Courtomer," he remarked, "what benefit you imagined you were doing La Rocheterie by running the risk of being brought back last night to his lodging on a shutter, as you might so easily have been."

Laurent was silent.

"Nor," pursued the elder man, "what support you fancied you were giving to his cause by brawling. Obviously it can have done it nothing but harm."

"There you are wrong," replied Laurent rather shortly. "Ask M. Perrelet."

"I am astonished that M. Perrelet did not use his influence to prevent the disturbance."

"He didn't want to," replied the duellist. "He enjoyed it—nearly as much as I did." He sighed reminiscently, almost tenderly.

"And now," continued his mentor, disregarding this, "if you do give evidence on any point, everybody in Court will see that you are without your sword."

"But so I was yesterday. You did not notice that? No, you were rather occupied yourself."

De Fresne glanced sharply at him. They were nearly at the hotel by now. "I am older than you, Monsieur de Courtomer, and therefore, I permit myself to regret that you did not think more carefully of the consequences of your behaviour to other people—to one person in particular."

There was now a wicked light in Laurent's eyes. "I am so sorry," he exclaimed, with what sounded the most genuine regret in his voice. "You mean that *you* were waked up over this scandalous escapade of mine! I had not realised that! Do, Monsieur, receive my most profound apologies!"

"Pshaw!" said de Fresne angrily. They had stopped at the entry of the hotel, scene of last night's drama. "You know I mean La Rocheterie, whom you might have spared an added anxiety!"

"But it is so hard," said the young man, gently, his eyes on the cobblestones, "so hard to know beforehand the consequences of an action . . . even of an entirely justifiable action like mine! For instance, even you yourself, Monsieur de Fresne, must have felt sometimes that if you had not brought back that letter of yours to the Bois des Fauvettes——" He stopped, raised his eyes, and saw from de Fresne's face that he had planted his counterthrust almost too well. The elder man turned his back and disappeared without a word into the hotel.

"Well, he should not have lectured me!" thought Laurent rather uncomfortably as he sped to Mme Leblanc's. And he burst in upon Aymar, who was finishing his breakfast, crying, "Return of the prodigal, who badly needs a wash! Oh, mon cher, I am at least a penitent prodigal—I am indeed!"

"But are you really an unhurt one?" asked Aymar, springing up and seizing him. "M. Perrelet swears it, but——"

"But you think that I too might have been hiding an injury from him and telling him a cock-and-bull story about it?—No, Aymar," he added more seriously, "I have not received—I could wish I had—the poorest equivalent of what you carry for me. . . . On the contrary, I hear that you had to be waked up this morning on my account, wretch that I am!"

"Who told you that, Laurent? I was already awake, after a night in a thousand."

But a little later, when, having washed and shaved, the prodigal was eating, Aymar said in a low voice, "You understand me when I say I hope it *was* for me that you fought, Laurent? Not that I wish a hundred times you had not exposed yourself in a quarrel that was not worth it! But it was my quarrel, was it not? I dared not ask M. Perrelet."

"Entirely and absolutely your quarrel," replied Laurent, looking him in the face, and thanking his stars that he had not

taken any notice of the remarks about Mme de Villecresne. "—And mine," he added, finishing his coffee.

Aymar had laid his watch on the table. He pointed to it now and got up. "Time to start. It is odd to think, isn't it, that when the hour hand gets round to this spot again it will all be over?"

Laurent fixed his eyes on the watch, suddenly miserable and afraid. "They can't proclaim you guilty, Aymar!"

"They won't proclaim me innocent. It will just be 'not proven.' I do not know whether they will deprive me of my commission, but I shall resign it, of course."

"But there is your reputation—there is the Moulin Brûlé and all the rest."

"Nobody is concerned with my reputation of last year, Laurent."

"That's just it!" cried Laurent angrily. "Oh, if only I were defending you!—Why is no one defending you, so that he could bring it forward, since you are so damnably proud that you will not do it yourself? All the time yesterday one could watch points that ought to have been made in your favour going unheeded, just because to emphasize them involved a little blowing of your own trumpet. And I suppose it will be the same to-day! Others may think it modesty—perhaps you think so yourself—but I tell you it is pride, rank, ineradicable pride! You are as proud as Lucifer!"

After which outburst, almost in tears, he put his head down on his arms on the breakfast-table. Aymar stood and looked at him.

"I did not know you had such powers of denunciation, Laurent."

"It is of no use denouncing you," said the muffled voice. "You will not do any differently." He lifted his head. "The only thing that would be of the slightest benefit to-day would be for *me* to change—to become, if only I could, Saint-Etienne for an hour."

"Do you think I want you changed, even for poor Saint-Etienne," asked Aymar gently, laying a hand on his shoulder. "I don't want you to be anybody but yourself, Laurent.—Come, we must start. You have no need to pretend to forget your sword to-day, my poor knight-errant!"

(10)

Just outside the Hôtel de ville Laurent saw de Fresne. He went straight up to him.

"I want to beg your pardon, Monsieur de Fresne, for what I said to you a little while ago about that letter. It was cruel and unjust."

De Fresne looked at him with those hard blue eyes of his. "It was certainly cruel. Do you think I have never said that same thing to myself these three months?" He began to pale under his tan. "I have said it a hundred times. But, as you pointed out——"

"Oh, I am sorry!" broke in Laurent impulsively. "And in honour you could have done nothing else. Do forget it! I was annoyed when I spoke."

"I think you had cause," said the elder man suddenly. "I had no right to read you a homily." He held out his hand.

Then Laurent was back in the place which would shortly see the scales dip to one side or the other with his dearest friend's honour in the balance—the place which he hated and which, at the same time, he was only too thankful to set eyes on again. For he had had a horrible fright.

But a precious grain of consolation was that among the more than doubled number of faces in the audience this morning one was missing. It would grin here no more—and was almost certainly not grinning where it was now.

The President began by saying that he had an announcement to make. Since M. le Général d'Andigné, now military governor of Maine-et-Loire, was staying a couple of nights in the neighbourhood, he himself had so far presumed on their very old acquaintance as to ask him, with the approval of the Court, to give them the benefit of his ripe experience in this difficult and delicate case . . . that was, subject to M. de la Rocheterie's having no objection. M. de la Rocheterie here signifying that he had none—on the contrary—Sol de Grisolles intimated that he had sent M. d'Andigné a short summary of the case as far as it had gone yesterday, so that if he came, he would be au courant. Meanwhile they had better proceed from the point at which they left off yesterday.

So the hapless de Fresne took his stand once more at the witness-table. Laurent tried not to listen. 'Fouquier-

Tinville' and the stout officer between them seemed determined to probe into every minute of the interval before de Fresne's return to the wood; hence Aymar also was on his feet most of the time. Laurent began to foresee that every detail of the shooting too would have to be gone over again, perhaps more fully. And all to what purpose? There was nothing to discover.

Oh, what would happen if they could not see their way to clearing Aymar? It began to be torture to him to look at the figure in front of him, especially when the bronze head turned a little, and he caught the outline of the sunken cheek.

"I can't stand much more of this!" he whispered at last to M. Perrelet.

"They will not go on at it for ever," the optimist whispered back, and he laid his hand over the young man's and gave it a squeeze.

"But there's nothing else to go on to!" replied Laurent miserably.

Why could they not believe Aymar's word when he said that he had all but arranged the plan with Saint-Etienne? How was it possible to look at him and think him capable of infamy? Were they all blind? And why did M. d'Andigné delay? Perhaps he was not coming after all? He was a great man, just about to be made a peer of France, and very busy at the moment settling the King's peace in Brittany. But, if he did come, surely he, the Vendean general of so much experience, he, the phenomenally cool-headed and resourceful, the hero of the incredible escapes from the Fort de Joux and the citadel of Besançon, the man of untarnished integrity and honour, *he* would recognise that Aymar was telling the truth!

Or, suppose that he did not!

The accursed stout officer seemed now to be criticising Aymar's intentions and dispositions during those three days in the wood, and as it went on Laurent wondered at Aymar's patience under it. The inquisitor had just ascertained that the nearest Bonapartist troops were no more than eight miles away, at Arbelles.

"Only eight miles!" he exclaimed. "I am surprised, Monsieur de la Rocheterie, that you did not try to withdraw to a safer position! Surely you must have known that you were very dangerously placed, and that you could not hope to do anything there with ninety men!"

And Aymar said nothing.

Suddenly M. du Tremblay leant forward and addressed the speaker. "Not do anything with ninety men, Monsieur de Noirliu? Why not? Have you forgotten that M. de la Rocheterie held the famous Moulin Brûlé for four and a half hours against five hundred regulars with—how many men precisely had you with you at Penescouët, Monsieur de la Rocheterie?"

"Eighteen," replied Aymar.

Something hardly distinguishable from applause ran round the audience. And du Tremblay went on quickly, addressing the President, "I trust, mon Général, that I am in order in laying stress on the necessity of remembering and allowing weight to those brilliant services in the past of which M. de la Rocheterie himself is careful not to remind us. As regards the handling of irregular levies, has not L'Oiseleur, young as he is, had more experience, and successful experience, than any one here except yourself?"

Sol de Grisolles nodded, and the Marquis de la Boëssière remarked, "Certainly more than I have had. I am glad that you have said what you have said, Monsieur du Tremblay."

So was Laurent. He would have bestowed a decoration on M. du Tremblay.

"Yes," said M. de Noirliu obstinately, "and that past experience is just why M. de la Rocheterie's remaining so near the enemy at Arbelles is so inexplicable."

There was nothing to be done with that man but drown him! Surely Aymar was going to give the very good reason he had for staying in the Bois des Fauvettes as long as he could! But in any case he had not the chance, for 'Fouquier-Tinville' observed quickly:

"It is explicable enough on a certain hypothesis—which I do not wish to press. But I should be greatly obliged if M. de la Rocheterie would give us the reason for another delay of his which also needs explanation. I only trust they are not susceptible of the same."

Aymar's head went up. "To what delay are you referring, Monsieur?"

"To the very considerable one which you have shown in courting this enquiry. You were released on the 16th of June. Even if your health was not then sufficiently re-established for you to go to the General-in-Chief in person, why did you not at least communicate with him if, as you assure us, you were so anxious to clear yourself? You made

no move whatever for a month, until the middle of July. Is that not true?"

"Yes, it is quite true," said Aymar steadily. He drew a long breath, and Laurent saw his fingers tighten on the paper he was holding.

"I suggest that the month's inaction then, needs some justification," observed 'Fouquier-Tinville' suavely.

In the silence that followed Laurent said to himself, "He was ill, unfit for it, you bully!" But would Aymar say that, since it was not the real reason? No, of course he would not! He replied at last, very coldly and quietly, looking down a little, "The reason for the delay was a purely private one."

"A reason that you would prefer not to give the Court?" suggested 'Fouquier-Tinville' with a twist of the lips.

"A reason," retorted Aymar, not without a measure of defiance, "that I am not called upon to give the Court!"

At last something had been found which L'Oiseleur would not answer.

"It had nothing in common then," demanded the inquisitor meaningly, "with your reason for remaining so long near the enemy in the Bois des Fauvettes?"

Aymar started. "Certainly not. The one was purely military; the other, as I have said, was personal."

"And you refuse to——" But a stir arose at the end of the hall, and he broke off. Laurent turned his head, and saw a glitter of staff uniforms. General d'Andigné had come!

He walked alertly to the dais, while the whole audience rose to their feet, he saluted the Court, who had also risen, was on the platform shaking hands, and, in a very short time indeed, having swept a keen glance round, was reading the notes of the morning's proceedings.

And Laurent, studying him, saw a blue-eyed man in the fifties, of no great height, with a fine, almost leonine head from whose brow the silvering fair hair was receding, and a slightly prominent underlip—a man who gave the impression of exceptional humour and vitality allied to a rare imperturbability. . . . But Laurent's deep interest in him was abruptly diverted. What had happened to Aymar? He was leaning with both hands on the little table before him almost as if he were physically overcome. Then he suddenly sat down, and, supporting his head on his hand, pulled his notes towards him. Laurent could see how deadly pale he was, and that the hand with which he was turning over the papers was shaking.

"It's the strain," he thought desperately. "It's telling at last; he won't get through!"

D'Andigné suddenly raised his fine head. "Monsieur le Président, I should like to make a remark. With regard to the suppositions raised by this shooting, surely the very fact that the men immediately suspected M. de Fresne on his return entirely disposes of the theory that in the three preceding days they had discovered some proof of M. de la Rocheterie's guilt?—I might go farther, and point out that it was solely to save M. de Fresne from those unjust suspicions that M. de la Rocheterie showed his men the letter . . . with the consequences to himself of which we know. Is that not so?"

"That is most certainly so, mon Général," responded de Fresne warmly. "M. de la Rocheterie undoubtedly sacrificed himself to save me."

"But, in the circumstances, could any honourable man have done less?" enquired M. de Margadel.

"No, he certainly could not," responded d'Andigné like a flash. "But then you are trying to show that he is not an honourable man. . . . And may I not also point out that, so far from his suppressing witnesses (which I see that some of you gentlemen are inclined to suspect) he here lost an unrivalled opportunity of allowing the most formidable witness against him to be suppressed by other hands. Had he let things take their course, and allowed M. de Fresne to be shot instead of him—which seems quite a likely thing to have happened—he would have got rid of the odium of the charge as well as of an adverse witness, for the man who had paid the penalty would have carried the guilt also with him to his grave. His execution would probably have cleared M. de la Rocheterie in popular opinion. Surely these considerations must have occurred to you?"

"I knew he would see things in a proper light!" said Laurent, whose spirits had gone up like a balloon, to M. Perrelet, while the Court conferred over this, and M. d'Andigné, his chin propped on his fist, darted glance after glance at L'Oiseleur's bent head.

"I think," announced the President at length, "that the Court does not wish to ask M. de Fresne any further questions. Have you any more witnesses to call, Monsieur de la Rocheterie?"

"Yes, two!" ejaculated Laurent under his breath.

And Aymar stood up—but it was not to call *him*. He threw

back his head. "I call Monsieur le Général d'Andigné," he said in a clear voice. "That is, if he . . . has not forgotten," he finished a little breathlessly. Laurent fell back in his chair.

Amid the universal sensation M. d'Andigné got briskly to his feet. "I was hoping that I should not have to be so pushing as to call myself," he remarked pleasantly. "Will you question me, Monsieur de la Rocheterie—I am entirely at your service—or shall I have the honour of myself giving the Court an account of our last—our first—meeting at the *Abeille d'Or* at Keraven on the afternoon of April the 27th?"

"The latter, if you please, General," answered Aymar.

(II)

When Laurent was in an argumentative mood he would assert that it was very wrong of M. d'Andigné, even if he were organising with great secrecy, not so much to have gone about under an assumed name (since under his own he would have been far too dangerous to be left at large) but to have kept up his incognito in front of L'Oiseleur that day at Keraven when Saint-Etienne, being from his own province of Anjou, knew all the time who 'M. du Parc' really was. However, he would acknowledge that on this occasion M. d'Andigné made what amends he could by the declaration with which he ended his short and convincing narrative. For he said, with emphasis, that it was he who ought to be exculpating himself. "I ought to have known better what attractions a risk holds for a young and ardent fighter, when I presented M. de la Rocheterie with the idea of the mouse and the two cats, and even illustrated it from a little piece of good fortune of my own in the old days. Had I not been all these weeks, as you know, engaged in military operations elsewhere, I should have heard of Pont-aux-Rochers before, and I could have taken some steps to mitigate the terrible consequences which an ill-timed suggestion of mine has brought on a gallant and honourable man. I am at least thankful that Fate has given me this belated opportunity for testimony."

He sat down again. Aymar, his hands clenched, tried to thank him, but his words were scarcely audible. As for Laurent, he was so radiant that it was all he could do to prevent himself darting forward to his friend, and, though he knew it not, M. d'Andigné, whom little escaped, was smiling at his very patent exultation.

"Well, gentlemen," said Sol de Grisolles, looking round with a satisfied air, "this puts a very different complexion on affairs. I little thought I was summoning the missing witness when I invited M. d'Andigné to attend as an assessor. As the Court has felt all along, the great weakness of M. de la Rocheterie's case has been the lack of conclusive evidence that his plan was already all but settled upon.* But now we have impeccable testimony to that fact." He looked round the table once more. "I suggest therefore . . . Yes, Monsieur de Noirlieu?"

"In spite of what M. le Général d'Andigné has pointed out to us," said that persistent investigator, "there is still one more point which I emphatically feel should be cleared up. What happened after M. de la Rocheterie was found shot, in the—how many weeks was it?—that he was at the château d'Arbelles? Might it not be said that it was because he had rendered a great service to the Imperialists that they rescued him, nursed him, and released him of their own free will . . . that he was, in short, less their prisoner than . . . their guest?"

Laurent, bristling, gave a kind of snort, and Aymar raised his head sharply. D'Andigné's face was a study in expression. The Court themselves seemed a little taken aback, then someone remarked, "Yes, if any evidence is available, it might be as well to know what were M. de la Rocheterie's relations with the Imperialists during his captivity, and the reason for his release."

"Perhaps M. de la Rocheterie will enlighten us," said Sol de Grisolles.

"I can do better, mon Général," responded Aymar rather grimly. "As it happens I can produce two witnesses as to the terms on which I was with the occupants of Arbelles. I will call first M. le Comte de Courtomer, late aide-de-camp to M. d'Autichamp, who was imprisoned in the same room with me for the whole time, excepting the first night. Monsieur de Courtomer!"

At last! Had Laurent not been so furious with M. de Noirlieu at that moment he might have been grateful to him for procuring him this chance. But—Aymar a guest at Arbelles! He could hear for once in his friend's voice his deep and justifiable indignation. But it was M. de Noirlieu who was going to be annoyed before he, Laurent, had finished, for he would look the fool he was.

He was excited but fairly self-possessed as he stood at

the little table, and began with reasonable lucidity to tell the story of those weeks at Arbelles. The early days came back to him so clearly as he spoke that, when he got to the happenings of 'Friday,' the memory of that scene, bubbling up fresh like lava, led him into an account of it more vivid than Aymar appeared to appreciate, as he sat there with his head between his fists, enduring it as best he might.

At any rate, Laurent made abundantly clear the point he had so desired at supper last night to emphasize—that Aymar, fighting with his last conscious breath that nothing should escape his lips, had nearly given his life for his comrade's victory. . . . Du Tremblay had his hand over his eyes as Laurent went on to testify that for the remaining weeks there were no relations whatever between the Bonapartists and their . . . prisoner, and to detail what occurred on Colonel Guitton's return. "And that is how and for what reason," he concluded, "M. de la Rocheterie was released—or, as some might say, turned out—from Arbelles."

"Thank you, Monsieur de Courtomer," said the President out of the ensuing silence, and Laurent turned and went to his place. He had not been asked a single question; and, as nobody seemed disposed to put one, Aymar observed that, since this evidence did not cover the first hours of his sojourn at Arbelles, and it might be supposed that he had had friendly relations with the Bonapartists on the day of his arrival, if on no other, he would call the doctor who attended him to prove that that was impossible.

M. Perrelet, looking very rotund as he stood forth, was extremely business-like and medical. He described in technical language M. de la Rocheterie's very critical condition when he was summoned to him, and during the whole of that first night; while Laurent behind whispered delightedly to de Fresne, "That will knock that idiot into a cocked hat! Listen to the long words and the Latin rolling out!"

"My patient," pronounced the little doctor, "was profoundly unconscious from the moment of his arrival. In any case a man so near death as he from hæmorrhage is not capable of having relations with anyone, friend or foe. . . . And since I am here," he went on unasked, but unchecked, "you will like to know, gentlemen, that I can more than corroborate what M. de Courtomer has said of the disastrous effects of Colonel Guitton's inquisition a few days later. As to the turning out, which was done in my absence, I was thunderstruck when I heard of it, and not in the least surprised that

in consequence I had to attend M. de la Rocheterie for a threatened attack of pneumonia. He had a very narrow escape of it. Hardly the treatment, altogether, that one accords to a 'guest'!"

M. de Noirliu, to Laurent's joy, was looking sour enough now. He fidgeted with some papers for an instant and then said: "Yes, that's very convincing medically. One cannot argue with a doctor. . . . You were not present, I understand, at the interview with the Colonel over those cipher notes?"

"No, but I came in the moment afterwards, to find M. de la Rocheterie almost *in extremis*," replied M. Perrelet rather snappily.

"I should like M. de Courtomer recalled," said M. de Noirliu.

Laurent came back, full of fight, but wondering what the stout imbecile wanted now.

"M. de la Rocheterie was, I presume, aware of your presence in the room, Monsieur de Courtomer, throughout this . . . unpleasant scene with the Colonel?"

"I should imagine he had something else to think about!" retorted Laurent with hostility. In a flash he saw what he was after—the man was a second Guitton!

"He must have known that you were present. Did you, Monsieur le Rocheterie?"

"I did," said Aymar curtly.

"And you were aware that he was a Royalist officer—one of your own side?"

"I was aware of it."

M. de Noirliu lifted his shoulders. "I think, gentlemen, that significant fact considerably detracts from the value of M. de la Rocheterie's refusal to give information—viewed as evidence to character, that is. Is it likely that he would have given it in front of a fellow-officer?"

"May I speak, Monsieur le Président?" burst out the witness.

Sol de Grisolles nodded.

"That—that . . ." (he managed to swallow the qualification) "point of view was precisely Colonel Guitton's when he had failed. I should have thought that this Court . . ." (again he struggled with himself, and abandoned the sentence). "Gentlemen, as this last interpretation has been launched, you ought in justice to know that when later on, Colonel Guitton—for it was by his connivance—resorted to

other means to make M. de la Rocheterie betray a comrade, and there was nobody there but the——”

Aymar made a little gesture, and said in a low, quick voice, “For Heaven’s sake, stop, Laurent! That is not relevant!”

But Laurent took no notice, and went on as fast as he could, “—He opposed precisely the same refusal to that . . . different method. You see, mon Général, I was safely hidden, but when the search-party found M. de la Rocheterie ill at the farm——”

He was interrupted again. “One moment, please,” said the Marquis de la Boëssière. “This is a little too elliptical for us to follow. Are we to understand that you were released at the same time as M. de la Rocheterie, or what?”

And Aymar seized the opportunity to rise and say with authority, “That will do, thank you, Monsieur de Courtomer. We need not trouble the Court with totally irrelevant matter. You can stand down.”

But a distinct murmur of “No, no!” went round. Laurent glanced at Aymar; he meant what he said, no doubt of it. Then he hesitated and looked at the tribunal.

“—But we should like to hear it, irrelevant or no,” said the President.

Aymar was obliged to give in. He sat down. Laurent did not look at him. He answered the previous question. “No, I was not released, sir. I escaped the same evening and joined M. de la Rocheterie. We went to a farm, and, as you have heard, he was ill from the exposure, and it was then that a party from the château came to search for me; and when they could not find me, but had M. de la Rocheterie at their mercy, *alone*, they tried just as vainly to make him betray me by——”

But here Laurent came to an abrupt stop.

“Well, Monsieur de Courtomer?” asked the President after a moment.

Awful and surprising finish! Laurent had so ached to tell this story of heroism and endurance, and now he could not. His own sensations of the time came back too vividly, and closed up his throat, precluding speech. Besides, his tongue did not seem able to find a way of uttering the thing. He stood there mute and agonised, with everyone—save Aymar—gazing at him.

“Do you mean that they threatened him?” suggested the Marquis de la Boëssière.

And as the hitherto voluble witness shook his head he said almost impatiently,

"What were the means they used, then?"

At that Laurent managed—but only just—to bring it out.

"They used . . . a red-hot ramrod!" he gasped; and fled the table.

(12)

There was an instant's electric silence. "*What!*" exclaimed several incredulous and horrified voices from the dais, M. d'Andigné's among them. "Good—God!" said the Marquis de la Boëssière slowly.

But Laurent, without waiting for permission, was already back in his place, his elbows on his knees, his head between his fists, heedless of what, under cover of the general sensation, M. Perrelet on the one side was disjointedly asking him, and of de Fresne swearing below his breath on the other. "Ought I to have done it? ought I to have done it?" he was saying to himself. "And will he forgive me?"

And all through the low-voiced conference among the Court which followed, and the subdued hum of the audience, he was more and more conscious (though he dared only glance at it) of the back of that figure in front of him. At first Aymar had covered his face. Suppose he did not forgive him!

Ah, here was Sol de Grisolles getting to his feet at last.

"I think, gentlemen, that we do not need any more testimony as to M. de la Rocheterie's conduct after the disaster, and as we now have M. d'Andigné's evidence as to the *bona fides* of the scheme he used, the case is practically at an end. None of the Court has any further questions to ask, since we do not propose to enquire into this last shocking episode. Have you yourself, Monsieur de la Rocheterie, anything more that you wish to say?"

Aymar lifted his head from his hands and stood up. "Nothing, thank you, mon Général."

"Then I declare the case closed, and I will ask all present to withdraw while the Court deliberates."

They followed the orderly to a little room opening off the hall. Directly the door was closed Colonel Richard went up to Aymar.

"I am more horrified than I can say at hearing of your treatment at Arbelles," he said, in a voice which indeed showed his strong emotion. "And as for this last outrage—torture—I have no words for it!"

Aymar flushed. "Oh, that was nothing. And I had no intention whatever of having it brought out in Court—I never dreamt of such a thing."

Laurent could not bear the sensation of estrangement (and at this juncture too) a moment longer. He turned round. "Aymar!" he began imploringly . . . but the Imperialist had not finished.

"I have been deeply shocked also to hear in detail what my own action led to. Had I not surrendered that letter——"

"And if I, still more, had not taken it back to the wood!" put in de Fresne.

"Gentlemen," said M. Perrelet, also intervening, and plucking the last two speakers by the arm, "I think that if M. de la Rocheterie—you will remember that he has been very ill—were to sit down quietly now . . ."

"Of course," said Colonel Richard instantly, and he and de Fresne withdrew themselves, while M. Perrelet shepherded his ex-patient to a bench in the corner, and sat down in silence beside him, with a hand on his wrist.

Near Laurent, Colonel Richard and de Fresne were now commenting optimistically on d'Andigné's extraordinarily opportune appearance. But Laurent had no eyes for anyone save Aymar, sitting there silent with closed eyes, his head against the wall. His face was like a cameo, as drained of colour and as passionless too; he gave the impression of having passed beyond suspense, but of being nearly slain with fatigue.

But as the offender miserably studied him the closed eyes opened. Aymar looked across at him and smiled. Then he made a little motion with his other hand. Laurent went, hesitatingly, and sat down by him (the guardian on the other side not attempting to say him nay), and though Aymar did not stir and had shut his eyes again, the hand which had beckoned Laurent there closed on his. He was forgiven—without a word.

And in the odd silence which now fell on all of them he, holding that hand, had to force himself to realise that this was the crisis, the dividing line, that Aymar's whole future hung on what those men in there (how could he so flippantly

have called them the Nine Muses) were deciding. They could not now find him guilty, after M. d'Andigné's evidence. But suppose they were not sufficiently agreed to acquit him? There was 'Fouquier-Tinville' and that stubborn de Noir-lieu. Oh, that was inconceivable! A fit of bitter revolt seized him. Why had Aymar submitted himself into their hands? As if their opinion mattered!

But it did matter, now! Involuntarily he clutched the cold hand tighter. De Fresne had begun to walk nervously up and down, but Colonel Richard was still leaning against the wall with his arms folded; the doctor was watching Aymar attentively. . . .

Steps outside—the orderly at last. There was nothing to be learnt from his face. "If you will come back now, gentlemen?"

Their hands fell apart. Aymar got up instantly. Without a look, even at Laurent, he walked to the door, and the others followed him in silence. It came to Laurent, as they went through, that by the position of the sword on the table they would know his fate. So, not very sensibly, he shut his eyes for a second. . . . Then the blood rushed to his head. The hilt of Aymar's sword was towards him.

. . . Somehow he was back in his place, standing, as they all were, his attention divided between the President, risen to address the acquitted, and Aymar's motionless figure in front of him. Why had the old Chouan put on spectacles to deliver judgment, since he was looking over, not through them? His voice came, relieved and kindly: "

"I have great pleasure in announcing to you, Monsieur de la Rocheterie, that the Court unanimously finds you innocent of the slightest intention of treachery when you sent your subordinate's letter to the Imperialists, and holds that you had sufficient grounds for considering your preconceived plan feasible. It does not therefore blame you, in the exceptional circumstances, for attempting to carry it out. For your efforts to prevent the disaster and your whole conduct afterwards we have nothing but praise, and not least for your courage in voluntarily submitting to a very painful ordeal. And if you will come forward, Monsieur, I shall most gladly restore to you your sword . . . untarnished."

There was an uncontrollable burst of applause from the audience, through which Laurent heard M. Perrelet beside him sniffing audibly. Aymar moved; took two steps forward, and then put his hand to his head and hesitated.

Laurent was conscious of a violent nudge from M. Perrelet, and his voice saying in a loud whisper, "Go with him; he's pretty well finished!" So he took L'Oiseleur by the arm from behind and steered him forward to the dais, and was thankful to see that the President, realising the state of affairs, was not waiting for him to mount the steps to the table, but was coming round to the top of them with the sword. And here, with a word or two of congratulation, he laid the weapon in its owner's hands. Aymar lifted it to his lips, tried to say something . . . then, clutching it to his breast, reeled suddenly backwards into the arms of Laurent and du Tremblay, who, already on the watch, had jumped down from his place at the end of the table.

He was indeed 'finished'; but they kept him on his feet until, someone producing a chair, they lowered him into it, and Laurent, kneeling by him with his arm round him, disengaged the sword from his grasp. In another moment M. Perrelet was bending over him.

"Give him time, gentlemen! . . . Unfit for this . . . a great strain. But he will be himself again in a little." Nevertheless he had thrust his hand inside the breast of Aymar's uniform. "Water?—yes, thank you!"

And Aymar's head lay against Laurent's shoulder, and Laurent, who rather thought he was crying himself, and didn't care, was battling with a most unseasonable desire to kiss it there, before everyone; and would very likely have succumbed, only that he was sure Aymar had not quite lost consciousness.

Meanwhile, the Court had broken up into little groups; the audience, though deeply interested, and disposed to quit their seats, kept their distance. And in a short while, after a period of being finely confused at what had happened, Aymar had recovered, and stood up, and Laurent, with shaking fingers, fastened on his sword—he and no other. No other save he had even touched it.

And, nursing that smaller joy amid the greater, he stood away watching the little scene of congratulation that ensued, members of the Court and of the audience alike crowding round that central figure to shake hands. So he witnessed the long grip, the long wordless look, which du Tremblay gave.

Last of all came d'Andigné, with that fine smile, and said something in a low voice which Laurent could not catch; but he saw Aymar flush, and knew that it was with pleasure.

But he did hear the General say, "Then you will give me the pleasure of your company at supper to-night . . . as a proof that you bear me no ill-will, Monsieur de la Rocheterie? I would suggest, in order to spare you the fatigue of the return journey from Kermelven, where I am staying, that you spend the night at the château; and I shall give myself the privilege of sending my carriage for you. I should like also," he went on, "to extend the invitation to your friend M. de Courtomer, whose acquaintance I am anxious to make."

Aymar turned and beckoned, and Laurent, as he was presented, braced himself for the ignominy of confessing that he was not in a position to accept this glorious invitation. Aymar would not remember his disability. . . . But what was he saying? "I am afraid, General, that M. de Courtomer will be unable to have the honour of supping with you, unless you can put in a word for him in the proper quarter. I regret to say that he is under arrest."

M. d'Andigné's keen gaze turned on the culprit. "Dear me, what for?"

"Because," said Aymar, half smiling, "he had a difference of opinion with an officer of M. de Margadel's last night, and as the officer is in bed this morning, and likely to remain there . . ."

"I see," said the Chevalier d'Andigné with a twinkle. "Oh, I think that can be arranged, Monsieur de la Rocheterie—yes, I think I can take that on myself. Our little festival would be very incomplete without M. de Courtomer. Of course he will honour me by staying the night also." He turned directly to Laurent. "I think I can guess what the difference of opinion was about, can I not?" and as Laurent did not answer, he put his hand for a moment on his shoulder and gave it a little pressure. After which he asked Aymar if he would be so obliging as to make him acquainted with Colonel Richard, with whose general he had been having some correspondence about combining to keep the unnecessary Prussians out of Brittany. So Aymar crossed the hall with him.

Meanwhile, M. Perrelet had requested de Fresne to procure a carriage. "We will drive him home," he said to Laurent and, drawing him aside, "Oh, my dear boy, that ramrod story! And I had deserted him; you had no doctor for those burns!" There were tears in the little man's eyes.

"Oh, come," responded Laurent, "Mme Allard and I did not do so badly, doctor. I shall set up in your line some

day." He spoke thus hilariously because, really, his eyes were in much the same state as M. Perrelet's. It was so wonderful, so adorable of Aymar, in the midst of his own triumph and relief, to remember his plight, and to be collected enough to seize the one available opportunity of getting him out of it.

De Fresne here came back and reported that there was a large and enthusiastic crowd gathered about the steps outside. "There is no doubt," he added in a satisfied tone, "that the finding of the Court is popular." As he said it d'Andigné, Colonel Richard and Aymar all returned their way, talking together.

"I should be most willing, Monsieur," came the Imperialist's voice. "If we combine, foes though we have been, it could be done. We are all Frenchmen. I know that General Lamarque is most anxious to do it."

"We will enlist L'Oiseleur also in the task," said General d'Andigné.

"But I . . . I have no men now," said Aymar, colouring.

"You have—what I once wished you, Monsieur, if you remember—your sword again," said Colonel Richard.

"It's your brains, your advice that I want, Monsieur de la Rocheterie," said the Royalist. "It will be a matter of arrangement with our allies, after we have come to an understanding with our compatriots. We can talk about it this evening. And if only you had the famous *jartier* back we could try the effects of that on the Prussians."

"But I have got it back," confessed Aymar, "and it is mended, and I am wearing it at this moment. It is at your service."

"Mended, eh?" said d'Andigné. "Magically, no doubt?"

Aymar suddenly wheeled round and put his hand on Laurent's shoulder. "Yes, magically," he said. "*He* mended it . . . like a good many other things."

His smile pretty well finished Laurent.

To cover his confusion he went out to the steps. His appearance was the signal for a burst of cheering which very quickly drove him in again. The crowd was much larger and more expectant than he had realised. He clutched Aymar, just turning away from du Tremblay, by the arm. "Can you hear them?" he asked. "In England, you know, we should take the horses out and drag the carriage. I wonder if MM. de Fresne and Perrelet are game?"

"I am," observed the little doctor gaily, but Aymar, beginning to move rather unwillingly towards the door, observed that for nothing on earth would he trust himself behind Laurent as a horse in his present frame of mind. "You might take the bit between your teeth and bolt again," he added with a meaning smile. And he put a hand on the culprit's shoulder and gave him a little shake. "I don't believe you are an atom penitent either. And what was so unpardonable, Laurent, was the inexactitude! I had told you so many times that it was *not* red-hot!"

Laurent choked back a queer sound. "Aymar, you really are impayable! . . . What's the matter?"

Aymar had caught sight of the crowd. "Must I go through that? I would rather face the ramrod again."

"I'm afraid you must," said Laurent, and, seeing that de Fresne and M. Perrelet and du Tremblay were close behind L'Oiseleur, he darted down the steps to open the carriage door. So, without meaning to, but with delight, he saw the picture he should unendingly possess for his own—Aymar coming down the steps after his ordeal, neither triumphant nor abashed, but just his own quiet and gallant self.

He had so much eyes only for that descending figure in its beautiful and unconscious perfection of poise, that it was not till afterwards that there came to him out of memory the stored scraps he had heard from the populace as he waited there—among people who wanted to shake hands with him too, which rather bored him. "He would not tell—he saved M. du Tremblay—that's M. du Tremblay himself—they say he was actually tortured—how pale he looks—I knew a man who was with him in the Moulin Brûlé——" and the only other actual visual impression he retained, that of a middle-aged Breton with a firelock slung across his goatskin, reverently removing his broad-brimmed hat as Aymar passed—the Chouan who had spat at him yesterday.

(13)

Laurent was in crazy spirits during the meal which followed at Mme Leblanc's. Particularly did the good M. Perrelet appreciate his sallies; and even de Fresne, who made the fourth, relaxed into amusement. "I shall no longer be a 'guest' at that disgusting convent; to-night we shall both be M. d'Andigné's 'prisoners.'—Do you imagine, Aymar,

that old de Noirliu will be there—a 'prisoner' too? I wish Guitton cadet could be . . . as a footman! I shall go and serenade him with the news this afternoon; and I shall write to Rigault, and he can tell them all at Arbelles. Oh, I forgot, Arbelles is evacuated."

"And in any case," observed Aymar, "they would only say that Saint Sebastian——"

Laurent dropped his knife and fork. His jaw dropped also. "Where on earth . . . I always hoped that you never knew . . ."

"My dear Laurent," replied L'Oiseleur, smiling, "your walks on the terrace did not give you the monopoly of the bons mots of Arbelles. I also had the privilege of hearing them during my one visit to the library."

"Of course," said Laurent, when he had got over this, "it was really M. Perrelet who turned the scale, not M. d'Andigné at all. Imagine being able to hurl about missiles like 'ecchymosis' and 'hæmorrhage'! I am considering adopting the first as an oath."

"I think," observed M. Perrelet, wiping his eyes (for his was not an exacting sense of humour), "that you had better go and work this off outside, my boy. I cannot allow you to remain in the house, because Aymar" (he made no bones about the Christian name) "is going to bed this afternoon so as to be in trim for the evening."

So a little later Aymar, lying on his bed, looked up at the young man and the old and remarked that they were both of them nothing but tyrants at bottom, and that when they got together one was simply crushed. "Not," he added, shutting his eyes, "that the process is altogether repugnant."

"I wish, my poor boy," said M. Perrelet softly, "that I had been there to tyrannise over this!" And he gently drew his hand down his right arm. Before Aymar could answer he had left the little room.

Laurent stood a moment longer. Then he suddenly dropped on his knees and hid his face against the bed.

"Oh, Aymar, at last . . . at last!"

Aymar gave a long, deep, tired sigh. "It was wonderful. . . . And *his* coming like that—a miracle . . ."

"*You* were wonderful!" said Laurent unsteadily.

Perhaps that evening was the most wonderful of all. No more efficacious method of rehabilitation could probably have been devised than that supper with General d'Andigné and

his staff, where L'Oiseleur was plainly the guest of the evening, and where yet the host, with exquisite tact, so arranged matters that it seemed the most natural thing in the world that he should be there, and not a festivity with an object. And, in Laurent's eyes, the unswerving patience, courage and dignity which Aymar had displayed throughout the enquiry, against perpetual odds both of bodily weakness and of circumstance, found here something of their fitting recognition. In the seventh heaven himself, he thought that, despite the marks of strain, of illness and of fatigue, there was no one in the room (except possibly M. d'Andigné himself) who could hold a candle to him for distinction. And there were moments when he looked as he had done before the catastrophe, when he might indeed have been the Aymar of the Paris reception. But he would never be quite the same again. To Laurent, at least, he was even more admirable.

Yes, he had come through the sombre forest at last, he had everything back again now . . . all but one thing, probably, to him, the most precious of all.

Very late that night, after the guests had dispersed, Laurent went into the room near his which had been assigned to his friend. It was a room so large that two candles had little effect on it, but the moon was streaming in also through the uncurtained window. And across the majestic four-poster he perceived, by the gleam of his shirt in the moonlight, that Aymar was sitting on the window-seat, partially undressed. But his head was down upon his arms on the sill.

Laurent hesitated. He had not meant to intrude on this. Perhaps, however, he was asleep. Not liking to turn back either, he went slowly on past the column of the bed, and by the time he had got round the foot L'Oiseleur had lifted his head and was looking at him with a little smile.

"Not in bed, Laurent?" he asked lightly.

"And you?" retorted Laurent. "Think of what M. Perrelet would say after such a day! It must be about two in the morning, I fancy."

"It has been an evening, certainly. Did you enjoy it?"

"What do you suppose?" enquired Laurent. "—But, Aymar, it was indescribably mean of you to tell them about that silly dungeon and my going back for M. Perrelet. You must have known that I was trying to stop you!"

Aymar made no reply. His smile, however, was sufficient commentary.

"Oh, confound you!" cried Laurent, laughing.

"Well, now you know what it feels like! And *I* got it over quickly!"

"Really, Aymar, I had no idea you were so vindictive!"

"I am a mine of evil qualities," announced Aymar. "You ought to know that from Arbelles. How long ago that seems, now. . . . You remind me, standing there with your candle, Laurent, of farther back still, of the night I spent under your roof in Devonshire, centuries ago, when you were so polite. You hoped I would sleep well—which I did."

"And I could not believe I was not dreaming, to have *you* there. It was then I saw the swan and the motto on your watch. And, Aymar," his voice shook a trifle and he sat down suddenly on the window-seat, "your motto is true. You are '*sans tache*'—you always have been!"

Aymar shook his head, smiling a little sadly. But he looked at him with great affection.

Now, if ever, was the chance to say something about Mme de Villecresne. "How pleased they will be at Sessignes," remarked the diplomatist, looking carefully out of the window. The observation sounded inane to him directly he had uttered it, particularly as Aymar made no reply.

It was no use trying to work round tactfully to the subject, and there was always the picture of Mme de Villecresne eating her heart out there now that she was enlightened. Besides, what of Aymar's own tell-tale attitude when he came in? . . . So he next said boldly, "I suppose you will go home now?"

"No, I am not going home," replied Aymar; and he also looked out of the window.

After a moment he turned his head. His pallor was accentuated almost to ghastliness in the moonlight. "I cannot very well do so. I told my cousin when I wrote about the enquiry that whether I were cleared or no I should not come back, and that I hoped she would continue to make Sessignes her home. I should not trouble her."

Laurent was now terribly bothered. What was the right thing to do? "Oh, but don't you think——" he began, and then floundered desperately. "Aymar, I think I ought to tell you . . . yet I don't know whether I had better . . . I . . . I really wish you would advise me whether to tell you . . ." and, unconscious of the absurdity he was uttering, he caught hold of Aymar's coat, which lay on the window-seat, and began to wring a button round and round.

A little smile dawned on Aymar's mouth as he looked at his occupation. "Better tell me . . . before you have them all off!"

"I . . . I talked to Mme de Villecresne after you left. I . . . I had no choice—I had to make things clear. She . . . she had not understood, Aymar—she really had not."

"Sometimes," said Aymar very slowly, and dropping out each word separately, "I have hoped that, since."

"Yes," responded Laurent eagerly. "You see, when you explained to her there was so little time—it was so sudden . . . all so horrible . . . and you never do yourself justice. . . . So I—she asked me, you know, and I could not go away like that, before she did understand—I explained."

"So you explained," repeated his friend. "That was . . . like you, Laurent." He put his hand abruptly to his throat, got up with equal abruptness, and walked away out of the wash of moonlight.

He had told him! Now that Aymar knew that she knew the truth—now, surely . . .

Aymar reappeared with startling suddenness, like a ghost.

"Hadh't we better go to bed?" he said in a dry voice.

Laurent jumped up and held out his hands to the ghost.

"Aymar, if you blame me——"

"Blame you? how could you think such a thing! Don't I know that you would make out a case for me a thousand times better than I could myself, and that you would do it so that it must be believed—if any truth in this world is to be believed! And that is just why . . . Never mind. Why talk of it to-night? Let us go to bed."

But Laurent had laid hold of him. "Aymar—I'm so stupid—for pity's sake tell me what you mean!"

"Why," answered Aymar, very quietly, standing still in his grip, "just this: she understands *now* . . . and it has made no difference."

Laurent loosed him, aghast. By telling him what he had done he had taken away his friend's last hope. He dropped back on to the window-seat.

Aymar sat down there too, and leant his head against a mullion. "You see," he said evenly, "that this is a just inference, for she has had plenty of time to write to me, even if it were only to wish me good success . . . and I have not had a word. She cannot be ill, or my grandmother would have mentioned it. So it is not my ineradicable pride, as

you call it, Laurent. I am certain that you put things better for me than I could ever have done myself. Another debt—the deepest, it might have been, of all I owe you. But it only shows that she has washed her hands of me. I dare say she has cause.”

The moonlight enshrined the two silent figures. Aymar had his chin cupped on his hand as he looked out of the window into the warm night. But before Laurent’s eyes was the rose-garden at Sessignes, the little white-clad figure, the misty eyes, the trembling voice . . . Yet nothing had come of that emotion after all.

Aymar turned at last and put a hand on his. “My dear Laurent, one cannot have everything. Don’t, don’t look like that! It is not for me to show myself ungrateful for this wonderful day. I don’t think that I quite realise myself yet that I am no longer an outcast, and that must be my excuse.”

Laurent gripped the hand very hard. “I knew the luck would turn,” he observed rather huskily. “No one could go on having such appalling bad fortune as you since you lost the *jartier*.”

“I suppose,” said Aymar softly, “that it has never occurred to you in your most imaginative moments—no, I’m certain it has not—that all the time I had something a thousand times better than the *jartier* . . . a piece of such transcendent good fortune that I might well spend the rest of my life thanking God for it!”

“What do you mean?” exclaimed Laurent. “No, certainly it has not. . . . Still, of course you were very lucky in having an opponent of the type of Colonel Richard, and again in coming across him as you did at——”

He stopped, because Aymar was gently shaking him.

“Is it nature or art, Laurent, that has made you so thick-headed? You don’t know what I mean? Well, go and stand in front of your looking-glass, and perhaps it will dawn upon you!”

But it dawned then and there, for as he stared at him Laurent slowly began to turn crimson.

CHAPTER X

'SANS TACHE'

"Will you leave me here?
So wrong, so proud, so weak, so unconsolated,
So mere a woman!—and I love you so,
I love you . . ."

E. B. BROWNING, *Aurora Leigh*.

"Did he do right—did he do right to go?" Virginia de Courtomer asked herself, on this the ninth day after her son's departure. Yes, of course he had done right, but had he done wisely? They are not always the same, she thought. And then, "Oh, you foolish, faint-hearted mother! you ought to be proud of having a son who does not count the cost of devotion!"

And she was proud; she had made no attempt to hold him back. Had he not told her, at last, with all the rest, of an arm with five burns upon it? Moreover, there was always that flooded river. And of his friend's innocence she had no doubt . . . but supposing he could not establish it? It was not only on Laurent's account that she had shivered as she thought of what had been going forward these last few days at Aurannes—a sort of Bois des Fauvettes over again, as Laurent had put it. But Laurent himself would be there this time.

Yes, indeed, she was glad that he was with L'Oiseleur in his ordeal, but still, she was a mother—a foolish mother, no doubt. And the General's words had been very weighty that day in the salon. Laurent could hardly have flouted them more openly and more immediately than he had done! No, Laurent cared nothing for himself and his reputation where his friend's was concerned—Laurent, who, as he had so absurdly remarked on the day which saw the beginning of all this enslavement, would never be a mother.

"Dear boy!" said the Comtesse de Courtomer, and went and worshipped the recent miniature of him on her table. No woman, she was sure, had ever had a son like hers. It was

just possible that to-day would bring him back, and that to-morrow they could start for their stay at their country house in Picardy as they had arranged . . . without the Aunts. They would have a delightful autumn, with plenty to occupy them at Courtomer. But she paused on this thought. Yes, it would be delightful provided that Laurent did not return from Brittany broken-hearted. If M. de la Rocheterie were not cleared he *would* be broken-hearted. What, in that case, was she to do with him?

But, of course, L'Oiseleur would be acquitted. Yet . . . he had really sent the letter—and, of course, for the sake of a woman! Back came the memory of that evening in Devonshire when she had begun her clumsy remark and he had replied that there was no danger. "Dear me," reflected Mme de Courtomer, sighing, "we women . . . it is not only as mothers that we are to be condemned! And this one . . . 'did not understand.' Well, I think, from my recollection of him, that I could have 'understood' anything that M. de la Rocheterie had done. I have that amount of infatuation in common with Laurent, at all events."

And to her thus congratulating herself entered a domestic.

"Will Madame receive"—the card was presented to her—"Mme la Comtesse de Villecresne?"

"The Comtesse de Villecresne!" ejaculated Mme de Courtomer. She remained speechless for a moment. "Yes, of course. Where is she? In the large drawing-room? Ask her to be so kind as to come here to my boudoir."

She could not have been more astonished had she learnt that the Empress of China had called upon her. Mme de Villecresne herself . . . she, precisely, who had not 'understood,' who had been so cruel . . . but who was not to be blamed for it (Laurent's dictum).

The pale girl who came in did not look like an empress, nor like a woman who could be cruel, nor even like one who did not understand. She looked as if she understood two things only too well—loss and a regret unutterable and hopeless. That comprehension spoke so clearly in her whole appearance that it caught Mme de Courtomer by the throat. "Oh, you poor thing!" her heart cried. But one did not begin like that at a first call.

Rather, "How kind of you to give me this opportunity of making your acquaintance, Madame," when the visitor was seated, and the August sun came in from the Rue St. Dominique on to her wonderful hair. "Now I can thank

you for all your kindness to my son during his stay at Sessignes, of which he has so often spoken to me."

"It was . . . your son who was kind to me," was Avoys's unexpected rejoinder to this. And she went on, looking at Mme de Courtomer with the saddest eyes the elder woman had ever seen, "If it were possible I should like to have the opportunity of speaking to him again."

"It is not I whom she has come to visit at all," reflected Mme de Courtomer. "It is Laurent—to find out, of course, what has happened at Aurannes." "I am so sorry," she said gently, "but my son has not yet returned, and I have heard nothing. I think, however, that we may expect him tomorrow—or even possibly to-day—and if you will allow him he shall wait upon you at once and let you know the verdict. But, of course, it will be favourable."

The bewilderment in the eyes gazing at her was succeeded by terror. "Verdict . . . what verdict?"

Good Heavens, did she not know? Well, she would have to tell her now, having blundered into it!

"Laurent is at Aurannes with your cousin, Madame. M. de la Rocheterie asked for a court of enquiry. If he has not informed you it was no doubt that he wished to spare you unnecessary anxiety, and I regret very much that I should have mentioned the matter. But, of course, he will be acquitted . . . must indeed be already acquitted by this time, and we shall soon hear the news."

One great effort did her visitor make to save appearances. "I left Sessignes so unexpectedly," she said with a formal air and a piteously trembling lip, "that the news . . . has not followed me. Perhaps I shall hear . . ." It was no use. The strained voice broke. "Aymar court-martialled—*Aymar!*" she whispered to herself, and covered her face.

Mme de Courtomer impulsively put out a hand. But it was not seen, and she withdrew it. "No, no, Madame, it is not a court-martial. M. de la Rocheterie asked for it himself. He is not under arrest, I know. Besides, I am sure it can only be a matter of form; he *must* be acquitted."

Behind the shrouding hands the girl was quietly weeping. Mme de Courtomer rose and went to the window and stood there thinking. Since Avoys de Villecresne knew nothing of this business at Aurannes—which in itself was strange—it could not have been anxiety as to the verdict which had brought her here in the hope of seeing Laurent. It must just have been hunger for some tidings of the lover of whom,

now, she knew nothing. Since his friend might know, she had come, a suppliant, for some crumb of information—to be presented with this! Poor child, poor child!

In a little Virginia de Courtomer became aware that her visitor had regained command of herself, and she came back to her place. "I cannot blame myself enough, Madame," she said, as she sat down again, "for having inadvertently thrown away, as it were, M. de la Rocheterie's consideration for your feelings. I shall have to make my peace with him!" she added more lightly.

Avoye's face was suddenly flooded with colour. "What, are you expecting him here, Madame?"

"Oh no," responded Mme de Courtomer instantly. "No. I wish I were. I share my son's admiration, you know, for M. de la Rocheterie. At my age, fortunately, one can confess to a penchant for a young man. My son's devotion to your cousin, which dated, I think, from the first moment he set eyes on him, is quite comprehensible to me. I am glad he is with him now—when no woman can be."

"It is not the first time," murmured Avoye, and she fixed her eyes on Laurent's miniature. "What would Aymar have done there in captivity without your son? He would have died. Oh, Madame, he has told me . . . of that wonderful devotion, that never tired . . . night after night, day after day, not only when he was so near death, but for weeks afterwards, and he—your son—unused to anything of the kind . . ."

"I have found once or twice in my life, Madame," said Virginia de Courtomer softly, "that a man can be tenderer than a woman on occasions. I like to think that my Laurent belongs to that company."

But Avoye had caught her handkerchief to her mouth and looked away. 'Good gracious,' thought her hostess, 'was ever anyone such a blunderer as I this afternoon? She must think that I am contrasting her behaviour over the whole business with Laurent's . . . which was not in the least my intention.'

Not to leave time for this reflection to sink in she hurried on, harking back to her visitor's question of a little while ago. "No, I expect M. de la Rocheterie is on his way back to Sessignes now, with this unfortunate affair no more than a bad memory."

"Did M. de Courtomer say that my cousin intended to return there if the . . . verdict was favourable?"

"No; I only assumed it, Madame, as the natural thing. There was no indication of his subsequent plans, I believe, in his letter to my son."

But Avoye leant forward. "Are you sure there was no sign of what he . . . meant to do if the verdict was *not* favourable?"

Mme de Courtomer suddenly got up and seemed to consider that a vase of flowers near Laurent's portrait needed attention. The fact was that she had suddenly and very vividly remembered Laurent telling her of such an indication, and she was afraid that her face might betray her. She did not want to pass on the knowledge to that poor child. And yet, was it not her duty? For really, if L'Oiseleur did come to that desperate step, and took it quickly, sailing perhaps from Nantes or La Rochelle, he might well be out of France before ever Mme de Villecresne could see him again, unless she were warned.

"Your cousin did say, I believe," she murmured, "that if the verdict were unfavourable—which, of course, is unthinkable—he should probably leave France altogether, and go, possibly, to the United States."

Every remaining vestige of colour went from Mme de Villecresne's face. "But, of course, dear Madame," went on Virginia, glancing at her anxiously, "that possibility is not worth considering; he is bound to be acquitted." And she made another attempt to lighten the atmosphere by adding, half laughing, "For purely selfish reasons I am glad to feel so certain of that, for otherwise Laurent would probably want to accompany him to America, and I cannot spare him!"

Her effort had no success. Gazing at her with a poignant directness and absence of concealment Avoye said, "Madame, I envy your son more than anyone else in the world. He had his chance and took it, whereas I——"

Virginia de Courtomer could resist no longer. She stooped over her and possessed herself of her hands. "Oh, my dear, surely it is not too late yet! Forgive me—but I am so much older than you, and I do desire M. de la Rocheterie's happiness, which I am sure is bound up with you alone!"

And Avoye clung for a moment to the kind hand. Then she loosed it, as one who has no right to comfort. "Yes, it is too late. He could not forgive the things I said to him that day. And I shall never see him again now. I have

deserved it all, because I had so little faith. And he went through martyrdom for me—martyrdom. He is going through it again now. That alone—the enquiry, Aymar being what he is—is enough to kill him. Only, I do thank God that he is not by himself there . . . that your son is with him . . .”

She rose, in a calm of despair more moving than tears. Mme de Courtomer, looking at her in pity, suddenly heard a door bang downstairs, and a voice . . . Was it? “Wait, Madame, pray! Do not go yet! That sounds like Laurent. If it is, he can give us news.”

Avoys shrank back. Mme de Courtomer caught her hands. “My child, have courage! It *must* be good news!”

Apparently it was. There was the further sound of a light foot running up the stairs, a voice outside saying cheerfully to someone, “Is Madame la Comtesse in here?” and a hand on the door. The mother of this presence left her visitor, who shrank still farther back towards the windows. The door burst open.

“Maman, maman, chérie, me voilà! Yes, yes, of course it’s all right—his sword given back to him untarnished, as the General said, and quite an ovation afterwards . . . supper with d’Andigné, no less. It was he who—oh, first, I must tell you that I’ve brought back a friend from Aurannes with me, rather against his will . . . in fact I had the deuce of a tussle over it, so you will give him a warm welcome, won’t you? He can’t run up the stairs like me, so I came on in advance.”

“But who is it, dearest?” asked his mother, disengaging herself from the whirlwind. “And you have not seen, Laurent, that I have a visi——”

But Laurent had gone to the half-open door and flung it wide. The guest who could not run up the stairs had just arrived on the threshold. There was a faint cry from the other side of the room. But Aymar only saw Mme de Courtomer.

“I really was brought by brute force; that must be my excuse, Madame,” he said, smiling. “To inflict myself on you was no part of my plans. It has been as near a case of kidnapping as I ever remember to have heard of.”

Mme de Courtomer, the tears coming into her eyes, gave him both her hands. “My dear Vicomte!” she said rather unsteadily. And Aymar bent his head and raised her hands to his lips.

It was at this juncture that Laurent became aware of Mme de Villecresne's presence. The shock, in his state of effervescence, was almost calculated to unseat his reason. But perhaps so many shocks in one room counteracted each other. Aymar was the only person who had not yet received his. At any rate Laurent was able to cross the room and kiss Mme de Villecresne's hand; he did not quite know what he said to her, nor she, doubtless, what she said to him. Afterwards he had the impression that she never even saw him, her eyes being elsewhere.

Laurent's went in the same direction, and so he saw Aymar receive his shock. He changed colour, stiffened a little, and bowed, but he showed no signs of advancing from Mme de Courtomer's vicinity.

The Englishwoman out-generalled him, however. "Come, Vicomte," she said, laying her hand for an instant on his arm, "you will want a word with your cousin. It was a lucky chance that Mme de Villecresne was calling here to-day, and can be the first to congratulate you."

And, making a little sign to Laurent (for his part ready enough to receive it) she slipped out by an unobtrusive door, followed by her son, and almost before they knew it, Aymar and Avoys were alone . . . in a silence.

"Forgive my intrusion," said Aymar quietly but formally to the carpet. "Had I known that you were here . . ." The sentence was fully completed by his slight movement of withdrawal.

"The court-martial . . . you were acquitted?"

"I was acquitted. My honour is cleared . . . in the eyes of the world at least. I succeeded in keeping your name from the public. If you really wish to hear any details, M. de Courtomer will no doubt give them to you." He paused a moment, and then added, "Before I relieve you of my presence I should be glad if you will tell me why you are in Paris?"

She tried to answer, but nothing came. If he would only look at her—but he kept his eyes resolutely averted.

"No, of course it is no business of mine," he agreed, still gently. "I had hoped . . . but that was not very likely in the circumstances. I am sorry to have deprived you of a home also. There is no more to be said." He bowed, and this time turned in earnest and walked to the door.

But the room was long, and the faint, heart-broken cry fluttered to him before he reached it. "Aimé . . . Aimé . . . !" Too many memories clung about that name for it to pass unregarded. Aymar paused, while the lips that had uttered it tried to say more, and could not for tears.

And slowly Aymar turned, and came back to the little figure—came much closer this time; and now he looked at her at last.

"Why are you crying, Avoye? Why do you . . . have you been ill?" he asked, himself as white as a sheet.

Twenty minutes later, a self-posted sentry, Laurent still leant over the balustrade of the great staircase outside. He had already beaten off Tante Clotilde, desirous of offering her congratulations on general grounds to the 'hero of Penescouët,' and equally outraged and puzzled at being refused admittance by her great-nephew and told with a nervous laugh that her felicitations might be premature.

And now . . . it seemed a long time that they had been left alone in there—those two. Was it a hopeful sign or no? Surely, surely. . . . But when Aymar was hers in very truth, would he be less *his* friend? . . . A surge of loneliness went over Laurent, but he fought it back. What did that matter, if Aymar had his heart's desire?

He heard the door open at last. He was afraid to turn round. Then he felt a hand on his shoulder, and a voice said "Laurent!" and he did turn . . . to learn what Aymar's eyes were like when he was really happy.

"She wants to speak to you—to thank you. She owes you so much. But I, Laurent, how shall I . . . ?" He paused as if to steady himself, and, abandoning the sentence, merely whispered, "Friend of friends!" and laid his hand over Laurent's where they clutched the rail. Their looks met, and Laurent knew, knew with certainty, that he would always be that to him—that happiness would not loosen the bond which unhappiness had so securely forged.

Then he suddenly perceived Avoye de Villecresne standing there beside her lover. And her face too was wonderful. But it was at *him* that she was looking.

"I shall never forget . . . Laurent!" she said, and held out both her hands.

